

AQUANEWS

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On the Road with Max

Max Estroff

These last few months, as everyone knows, business has been scarce. I have been continuously working the phones trying to get appointments, especially in the South, the need to get into the water motivating me against the rejection. By the beginning of February, I had managed to get some appointments in the Carolinas and in Georgia. Then I started calling my Floridian accounts. I managed to get a few more appointments, just enough to cover the real purpose of this road trip.

This last seasons' dives were all either with Uncle Vinny in Long Island Sound or with the club at Hessian Lake. Since all of them were shallow dives I started my ocean diving with Captain Leo out of Boyton Beach. The boat does a two tank cruise along the 60 to 90 foot reef system. Inside is 60 feet, a broken wall sometimes having 10 to 15 feet of relief, lots of cracks and holes and loads of ledges to look under if you carry a light. Outside to the east it slopes down to 90 feet. This is a tongue and groove formation. When I want to stop and look closer at something, I just set the reef hook attached to the flag line. To move on you just pull the hook and away you go. This is my typical drift dive and why I always carry a flag.

The water temperature was 68 degrees; the air in the mid 70s. I had on a brand new 3-4-5 wetsuit. When I got back on the boat off it came and on went my dry suit. The rest of the week this is what I used. The very first dive was inside. Very few lobsters. The usual, tropicals, but not a lot of anything else. The only Hog Fish I saw was back on the boat. Looking under a ledge with my UK1200 I found a Goliath Grouper.

All I saw was the back end of it, as it retreated into the reef and disappeared. Where and how it managed this was amazing. This was the first time I had seen one of these monsters on a reef. Before, always on wrecks except in the Bahamas on a Feed-the-Sharks dive. There they were in open water, partaking in the free food.

The following day I did this again. Swimming around the boat in the marina was a small, Spotted Eagle Ray. The first dive, nothing worth mentioning. The second dive, I saw a large Loggerhead Turtle swimming along the top of the reef. Two different Nurse Sharks, one up against the reef, the other also swimming along the top of the reef. Saw my first Spotted Golden Eel. I had to look it up in one of the Paul Humann Books.

The next few days I worked but on Thursday I was to go diving with ScubaTyme out of Pompano Beach. I show up but no one else does. I called the dive shop which signed me up for this trip, they informed me that the boat's engine was being overhauled and since they did not have my cell number, they could not reach me. The dive business is really taking a beating in Florida. There are no afternoon boats going out. Two and a half hours later, I am loading my gear into a boat in Tavernier with Conch Republic Divers. Vinny and I dove with this operation last year. To me, it seemed like they could care less. Just another body off the highway. There were seven of us, all on Nitrox. The first dive was "Conch Wall" down to about 90 feet, with about 30-40 feet of relief, sloping to the east. Beautiful topography,

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AQUANEWS

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POINTS ON INTERNATIONAL DIVE TRAVEL

Or, How To Return WITH Your Baggage.

By Lada Simek

First of all, let me say that half of this information is from a BTS workshop given by Ken Knezick, A professional tour guide and the owner of a dive travel agency.

FIRST: Don't put your gear in a dive bag. They are the second specialty bag to get stolen. (Golf bags are first). Use a cheap looking, worn container.

SECOND: Unless your connecting flight is the same airline, do not check it through. Pick it up and deliver it to the second airline. If you do not, and it ends up missing, one airline will say "We gave it to them" and the other "We never got it".

THIRD: Put a luggage tag on so your address cannot be read easily. (There are people whose job it is to hang around at airports and collect addresses of individuals leaving. They then sell the information to others who may rob your house). Make sure you have your name, phone # etc. **INSIDE** your bag, as well as a copy of your passport, numbers to call for emergency or reporting missing credit cards.

FOURTH: Make your bag distinctive. I painted big, bold, white squares and triangles on most sides of my bags. They can be visually recognized from a hundred yards away! If you report a missing bag, you will be asked to describe it. If you say it is black and about soo big, they will laugh at you. Every year about 3000 unclaimed bags go into a warehouse in New Jersey and then they are shipped to Texas to be auctioned off. 90% of them are black and soo big.

There are two ways your bag gets stolen. The professional may be at the front of the carousel conveyor belt and he will likely take an expensive looking bag. If he gets caught, all he has to say "I am sorry, I made a mistake". He would never take a distinctive bag such as mine because it is too noticeable.

The other is by an unintentional thief. Let me explain. On our last club trip to Dominica, I observed that 75% of the individuals removing bags from the carousel, did not check the luggage tags. The company that made your bag probably made thousands. They are out there. Suppose some methead takes your bag home by mistake. On realizing his error, he may not have the character to admit his mistake and return it to the airport in embarrassment. He may also be afraid of being accused of stealing it. The chances are he will keep it and maybe go back to the airport to claim his own. Fifty cents worth of cheap paint may save you a thousand dollar loss, of which only five hundred are redeemable from the airline. Mark those bags!

Rockland Aquanauts Organization Inc.
Mission Statement:

To provide, promote, and advance environmental protection, care, and voluntary clean-up of waterways by any and all lawful means; to promote the importance and care in every manner possible by environmental awareness and otherwise; to purchase, print, publish, and circulate literature to promote the importance and care of the waterways and the work of the Corporation. To perform all acts the Corporation may deem appropriate or advisable in such operation; to establish, provide, and voluntary clean-up waterways, to encourage, support and subsidize the cleaning and protection from pollution.

On The Road With Max

(continued from page 1)

but no fish, no lobsters, nothing. Just a few Banded Coral Shrimp, all in one hole.

The second dive was a 16 foot shelf. Considering that everyone was using Nitrox, this was pure Mickey Mouse. There were no fish. Nothing but sand and broken up coral. I spent 35 minutes finding sea urchins in some of the holes. The only cool thing was seeing four squids together, each about 10 inches long. This dive site, considering the type of divers (no students), the gas we were breathing (all Nitrox), was a joke. The joke, being on us, the paying customer. The boats agenda, not the divers, took precedent. I will not dive with them again.

Saturday I was back in Boyton Beach, two more easy drift dives. A few lobsters and a few fish. The question being: Where are all the fish?

Sunday I drove back down to Marathon Key to dive with Peter Bain. We dove with Tildon's Scuba Center, MM49. In the cove where the boat was tied up was a single, large manatee, just swimming around the boat and hanging out. The plan was to dive "The Thunderbolt." There were four of us; A married couple from Ohio, and Peter and me. The boat captain's briefing was aimed at Peter and I; we both had large tanks, pony bottles, and lights. No deco diving, no penetration, a timed swim around and back. I look at Peter, he looks at me, and with out saying a word we know we will do our own thing. On the way out the captain says the boat's GPS is not working. We get there but can't find the wreck. A nearby boat with two guys fishing point where the underwater mooring ball is. We finally find it but the mate can't get to it because of the current. (No comment.) Site abandoned.

We end up diving what I named "The Desert Trench." The captain said reefs were to the left and right of where he dropped the anchor. The pull from the back of the boat, to the anchor line and down against the current was my personal challenge. Glad to say, no problem. Down at the bottom, 78 feet, the anchor had already created its own trail in the sand, as the current was pulling the anchor and boat along. There really was nothing for it to hold on to. I ran a reel from the anchor chain. (I know you're not supposed to do this.) We swam into the current along the sand bottom, not that far before we both came to the same conclusion; it's time to turn around, hence the name, "The Desert Trench." Without the line, getting back would have been a problem. Before we knew it, we were abreast of the anchor and had to kick back to it.

The second dive site we went to was called "Samantha's Reef." I did not switch tanks for this dive which I regret, for it is really a very nice shallow reef at 23 feet. I went into the water with 1400 lbs left in my steel 120 expecting another lame shallow dive devoid of life and experienced one of my best in Florida. The vis. was about 30-40 feet. There were tropicals everywhere. Schools of Blue Tangs and Yellow Tails. Two different Hog Fish. Looking under a ledge, I disturbed an 18inch Tiger Grouper. Under another ledge I saw more lobsters than I had seen the whole week. There were at least ten of them, mostly shorts, but a few big ones. This site was teeming with life and I could have easily spent more time there. Peter and I had lunch in some local shack, and then I started driving back to my cousins, 130 miles north.

The next day, I started driving towards home, when I get a call from Peter. When he went back to the shop, the owner said he was very sorry about what happened, and would give us each a free trip to "The Thunderbolt." I look forward to being able to take them up on their very generous offer. There are so many dive shops in the keys, that it's always appreciated when one makes an extra effort and doesn't treat you like just another tourist.

Those Guides Who Manhandle Fish

and why we should avoid them

from the February, 2008 issue of *Undercurrent*

Undercurrent reader Don Wilson (Caldwell, NJ) was diving with a friend who owned a dive operation on Hawaii's Kona coast, when the latter caught an octopus and held it. The hapless animal depleted its ink reserve. "When my friend finally released the octopus, it darted toward cover, but too late. A fish shot from the sidelines, grabbed the doomed octopus and hauled it away."

Maybe it was the octopus's destiny to become dinner for a fish, but it probably would have had a longer lifespan if a human hadn't played such a part in its death. Wilson hollered at his friend, but what do the rest of us divers do when on trips with dive operators who have no qualms about handling marine life?

Obviously, divers want to dive with lots of fish and interesting marine life all around them. Knowing this, dive businesses do what they can to guarantee that happens, from offering shark feeds to holding creatures up close. They mean well, but they are also changing animals' natural behavior, modifying their eating habits, and making them more fearful or more aggressive. Can dive operators and divers find a happy balance between seeing lots of fish and letting them be?

"Pretty Much Everyone Here Does It"

It's not an even balance in some popular dive destinations. In our travel story about San Pedro, Belize, in this issue, our writer described how divemasters from Amigos Del Mar grabbed nurse sharks to let divers rub their bellies, and pulled lobsters and crabs out from under rocks to let underwater photographers get better shots. Turns out they're not the only ones. Many *Undercurrent* readers told us about similar experiences while diving with San Pedro dive operators, who seem to delight in manhandling critters.

Subscriber Stu Mapes dived with the Ramon's Village dive operation last fall and was appalled to see divemasters riding nurse sharks, chasing and sometimes catching sea turtles, picking up and passing around various creatures, and handling coral. "One of the first things stressed to me when I certified was to look, not touch, and I've found most divers follow that advice," he says. "However, in Belize it seems to be the norm."

"I'd rather photograph fish acting naturally instead of being held in someone's hands."

Rick Sutherland, the dive shop manager at Ramon's, denies that happens and told *Undercurrent* that he tells divemasters not to touch anything. "I don't want people doing that kind of thing in my home, so why should we do that in theirs?" He says Ramon's is not an operation that throws out chum in the Blue Hole, and that boats only feed fish at two Ambergris Caye dive sites, Shark Ray Alley and Esmerelda.

Amigos Del Mar confesses to handling fish and feeding shark and grouper, and manager Gilmar Paz is very blasé about it. "I know it's controversial for the environmentalists but most of our divers like it because the marine life comes to them." He says Amigos Del Mar has no official fish-touching policy, nor is any mention made in dive briefing. "We leave it up to the divemasters to decide what to do, and we do tell divers that if they don't like what's happening, then tell us so. We try to please everyone. But pretty much every dive operator here does it."

He's probably right, as *Undercurrent* readers wrote of similar experiences at Ambergris Divers and Patojo's Dive Center. However, in our Belize story our writer gave Aqua Dives divemasters on the Blue Hole day trip thumbs up for not touching marine life.

"It's Hard to Play Scuba Cop"

Subscriber Susan Goudge (Lake Zurich, IL) had an octopus experience similar to Don Brown's while diving with Kauai's Seasport Divers on a trip to Niihau. "Our divemaster Luke took an octopus from its crevice and held his hand up so that each time the octopus tried to escape, it swam into Luke's palm. There was ink everywhere, and a great photo op of an octopus with tentacles extended, but it seemed more like a bully-in-the-playground situation."

Seasport owner Marvin Otsuji told us he has heard that complaint often but says he can't do much. "I can't be there on a day-to-day basis. We don't have an official policy about touching, but I do tell the crew to be 100 percent professional." He says divers can sometimes be the problem as many are overeager and do similar grabs. "We try to say don't touch as best we can, but we can't constantly tell people not to without making them upset."

It's a copout for businesses to say they don't have a policy and can't control their employees. Having no policy about pulling critters from crevices means that it's ok to do it. And it's another copout to place blame on divers and make employees solely responsible when many are failing to set good examples of marine life interaction.

While diving with Cozumel's Dive Paradise last spring, subscriber Deborah Brown was one of the few divers with a camera, so a divemaster decided to find her photo subjects. "He managed to find a splendid toadfish tucked under coral, as is customary. I was ecstatic because Cozumel is the only place to find it, so I quickly moved in to snap some shots." But then the divemaster took a stick and started prodding at the fish, using his other hand to pull it from its hideout so Brown could get a better shot. "I was so irritated that he would go to such lengths that I quickly turned and swam away in hopes he would leave

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the fish alone. To me, no picture is worth harming the subject. I'd much rather have a shot of a fish acting naturally, even if that means I'll only get to see part of its body, rather than being held captive in someone's hands."

When *Undercurrent* told Dive Paradise owner Renee Applegate about the incident, she was very upset. "He shouldn't have done that, and all the divemasters here know they're not supposed to do that. It's in the briefing for divers. We dive in a marine park and the rules are supposed to be observed."

"Anything you do to make a fish change direction is something you shouldn't do."

You can't always blame the operator for the actions of one grabby divemaster or diver. But those who see harm being done should speak up and tell the manager who, at the least, should pull aside the offender for an explanation. Subscriber David DeBoer (Dallas, TX) took it further and left after two days of a scheduled dive week with Scuba Mex, south of Cancun. "Both owners and divemasters would bother anything to provide interest for the divers. The grabbing of pufferfish to induce defensive inflation was a favorite. Latching onto turtles and yanking lobsters out of crevices by their antennae were other specialties. It makes no difference whether it's your neighbor's cat or a marine invertebrate, it's animal cruelty." Scuba Mex did not reply to our calls or e-mails.

Marta Arensberg (Issaquah, WA) was diving last September on the *Palau Aggressor* when she noticed two divers taking underwater photos of a small turtle. They had pinned it against a wall, allowing it no escape. "They kept their lenses less than 18 inches from this little guy for over five minutes, so I motioned to one of the divemasters to stop them. He did nothing, just shrugged his shoulders at me."

When *Undercurrent* asked Wayne Hasson, president of the *Aggressor* fleet, about that episode, he replied that there was nothing the divemaster could have done just then. "You can't scold them in front of other people underwater. Who wants to create an embarrassing situation? It's better to take them aside and say, 'You've harassed turtles and upset divers; do it again and your diving privileges will be revoked.'"

Hasson says all *Aggressor* boat briefings state no touching, no feeding. "That doesn't change the fact that people still do. Some can't help themselves. What do you do?"

"There Is A Right Way to Touch Fish"

Many *Undercurrent* subscribers recommended dive operators who set good examples about not touching coral or disturbing animals. Susan Goudge says Smitty, formerly of Sea Eye Divers in Grand Turk who now has his own shop, keeps divers' encounters with animals as natural as possible. David DeBoer applauded Saba's Golden Rock Dive Center and Sea Saba for upholding the marine park's strict rules. Scott Okhuysen (Stephenson, MI) says Crystal Clear Watersports in the Florida Keys continually stressed the importance of being only observers. "On one dive, it was reported that a diver caught a ride on a turtle. The divemaster very nicely asked this person, who admitted it. Then he not so nicely explained that if the diver did this again, he would never dive with the operation again."

Many readers have raved about diving with Touch the Sea in Bonaire (www.touchthesea.com). Owner Dee Scarr takes four divers maximum, gives them 45-minute briefings and aims to get them close to anemones, octopuses and cleaner shrimp. Ed Stevens (Austin, TX) describes his memorable experience. "We entered the water a little before sunset under Town Pier and came across a shy octopus in her den. We sat on the bottom and waited quietly. Slowly, the octopus emerged from her cavern and approached me. I slowly put out my bare arm and the octopus, about three feet in diameter, gripped me and climbed up. Then came the unusual part -- instead of continuing her climb, she started to tug on my arm and swim back toward her den. I slowly moved with her, not imagining what she was up to. Dee wrote on her whiteboard, 'She's taking you home!' This adorable octopus and I had to split up because I was running low on air. Did we do wrong by socializing with this wild creature? I certainly benefited. Did she?"

Yes, says Scarr. In her opinion, interacting can be done in ways that are educational and respect the animals. "The simplest way to look at it is the wording of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act," she says. "Anything you do that makes a fish turn the opposite direction is something you shouldn't do."

Even venomous animals can be approached in the right way. Scorpionfish lying on the sea floor raise a dorsal fin to show discomfort. Scarr tries to find one lying low in flat sand so she doesn't approach it from above. "If it raises the dorsal fin, I back off. If it doesn't, I position my four divers in positions so that they're not making a semi-circle around it and the fish sees that if he wants to go, he can. You can't pen in anything or it will feel uncomfortable." Scarr reaches out a finger, then raises the dorsal fin a bit. If the scorpionfish hasn't moved, she brings divers in one by one to pet it in the safe spot behind the fin. "The goal is to make the fish comfortable."

It's apparent that too many dive operators let their divemasters manhandle marine life. Some operators encourage it while others turn their backs. Their goal is to entertain their customers, regardless of the effect on the natural environment. In most cases, they are threatening the security of the animal, forcing it into a defensive mode. Dee Scarr's approach is not only entertaining, it is also gentle and educational. Others should follow her lead. As it is now, reckless dive operators are another element in the destruction of our reefs and marine life. Divers ought to avoid them.

One Diver Pleads Guilty in "Operation Freezer Burn"

John R. Niles, a 50-year-old house painter from LaBelle, Florida admitted in court on January 21 that he was one of six divers who illegally harvested more than 1,100 lobsters from the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary last August. The other defendants include two charter fishing captains, Rob Hammer of Miami and Mike Delph of Key West. After watching the six divers place artificial habitats in the water, then dive down to harvest lobsters from the sites, federal agents made their arrest on opening day of lobster season last year. The defendants allegedly stored the illegal catch in underwater cages to sell them later. Niles is free on bond and will be sentenced in April; he could get up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Rebreathers, Pack Your Canisters Properly

While it may be old news to rebreather divers, a recent study points out why failing to pack the soda lime canister properly can lead to toxicity incidents, in which the presence of CO₂ on inhalation was the precipitating factor. Researchers at the Israel Naval Medical Institute found that tilting or other movement of a loosely packed canister can lead to rearrangement of the free spaces, resulting in variations in channeling and considerable differences in CO₂ scrubbing capacity. Pressure-packing the soda lime probably forces channels through the less dense granules and reduces the scrubbing efficiency. The study "The Effect of Over- or Underfilling the Soda Lime Canister on CO₂ Absorption in Two Closed-Circuit Oxygen Rebreathers," is printed in the Journal of the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society, volume 35, number 3.

Corallimorphs

By Lada Simek

These creatures are often mistaken for anemones. They have a tube-like body which is often buried, with sort tentacles and a very protruding mouth. Unlike in anemones, the tentacles are arranged in concentric circles. They are sometimes called false corals, because of the similarity to the coral polyps, but they do not produce a calcareous skeleton like the hard corals. I took this photograph was taken in Belize and it is the only time I have seen this creature. It is called the orange ball corallimorph, (or incorrectly, the orange ball anemone). It is, in my opinion, the neatest critter in the Caribbean. It is about three inches in diameter with perfectly transparent (invisible) tentacles with an orange ball at each tip. From above they look like a planetary system with the sun at the center.

They are listed as uncommon in the Caribbean area.



ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE DUE

Rockland Aquanauts Organization
2009 Dues

I guess it is that time of the year again, Membership Dues are due. Last year all our members received much more than they gave out to the Organization. As usual you will be receiving a tax donation for the first \$25.00. All members who attended the Annual Dinner not only received money off their own dinner but they also received money off their guests dinner. Everyone whom attended also received prizes, some worth many times the cost of their Dues. Don't forget the Annual Picnic as well as all the BBQ lunch's after the Lake Dives.

So please send in your \$42 dues early to;

Rockland Aquanauts Organization
c/o
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BBQ Help Needed

We have BBQs after every Hessian Lake dive, but next year, we don't want the chef tasks to fall on the same people all the time, so we are asking for your help. If you plan on coming to the Hessian Lake dives, please consider offering to set up, cook, or break down the BBQ gear.

Setting up might mean you set up before diving, get out of the water first, or forego diving that day. **Cooking** means you cook for everyone who shows up, not just yourself & your friends. **Breaking down the BBQ gear** means you stay until everyone has eaten and the grill is cool enough to put into your car to store until the next dive.

You don't have to be a Board Member to help. Everyone can pitch in. Any expenses, like buying food, are reimbursable. So please look at the dive dates and let us know when you can help out.

Thank you

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April 2009

On The Road With Max, Diver Pleads Guilty, Divebags & Travel, EmbroidMe, Dues

****There Will be NO April Meeting ****

Can Anyone Help Us Set Up Meetings?

Please contact info@rocklandaquanauts.org