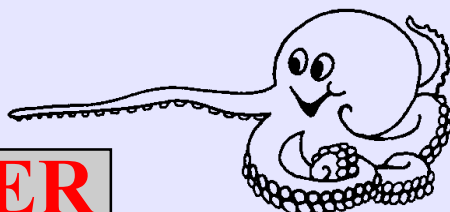


THE REEF SEEKER



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January - 2026



HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

Hope 2026 is off to a good start for you (despite the rain).

I freely admit to being not only an optimist, but a bit of a Pollyanna. I try to see the good in things and situations or at least see a way out of difficulty. So the polarization that has taken place in our country in the past year has been a bit distressing and upsetting for me personally. Why are people so angry? And why do some revel in the misfortune of others and even go out of their way to inflict cruelty? I just don't get it.

One of the things I like about diving is that, as a community, we're the opposite of that. Think about it. When you go on a dive and discover some unusual critter – like a frogfish, or a pretty nudibranch, or you run into a Giant Sea Bass – your first instinct is likely NOT to try to keep it to yourself but to share with whoever happens to be around you at the time. And

even when you get back to the boat or shore, you're likely to let others know of your find and will probably tell them, "It's over that way at a depth of whatever." There's a genuine joy in sharing your discovery with others.

Why can't "real" life be more like that? And I get it that when you start talking reality, you've probably got money involved and that changes people's perspectives. But the Pollyanna in me wishes it didn't. When is enough enough? That's one thing I like about Chamber Day. It's a time when we put aside the politic and the petty differences and all come together with whatever we can for the greater good of the local diving community. Would that we could run our entire country like that.

Enough of my waxing rhapsodic. Let me just end this part by saying it's a new year so, at least psychologically, a new start and a clean slate and here's hoping that 2026 is better for everyone than 2025 (which was still better than 2020) in whatever form that might take.

INDO IN JULY

We've got a great slate of trips planned for 2026 including a return to one of our favorite places to dive, Murex Dive Resort in Manado, Indonesia. Although this trip

has previously been listed as SOLD OUT, we've had two cancellations so I've actually still got one bungalow left available. (If you want to pay the single supplement, this could work for a single diver as well.)

We've always loved going to Murex but are even more excited this time because since we were last there in 2024, they've done some major renovations. They gotten rid of the closet-sized camera room and have built a brand new space that's modeled after their operations in Lembeh and Bangka. On top of that, they've created a new open-air bar and lounge by the pool area, built some new premium cottages, and refurbished some of the existing ones (which were already pretty nice). So we're really looking forward to the physical plant improvements.

But the biggest reason we go there is for the diving. I'd also like to think that we have this set up in an ideal way where we start by plantings ourselves at Murex Manado. That means we have easy access to the marvelous coral walls of Bunaken Marine Park, which is about an hour away by boat. We also have easy access to the myriad of shore sites, mostly muck dives but with some sporadic reefs as well, that dot the Manado coastline. So a typical day for us might mean breakfast at the water's edge

to start, hop on a boat and do two dives at Bunaken, come back to the resort for lunch, and then head off for a mid-afternoon close-in shore dive, come back for afternoon tea and/or a house reef dive, and then clean up in time for a sumptuous dinner. Go to sleep and repeat the next day.

But we don't want to ignore the diving opportunities at Bangka and Lembeh. Rather than uproot from Manado, we plan day trips to each of those diving hotspots. So we'll do a day at Bangka which will include (conditions permitting) diving the most lovely soft coral reef in the world, Sahaung. And we'll do a day of three dives exploring the Lembeh Straits where we might find Pygmy Seahorses, Mimic Octopuses, and other marvelous creatures that seem to congregate in this 10-mile stretch of water.

In short, diving with Murex Dive Resorts and Reef Seekers offers you some amazing world-class diving opportunities. We're leaving L.A. on July 1, arrive in Manado July 3, will have nine days of diving, and then head back on July 13. The flights are long but relatively easy with a non-stop between L.A. and Singapore coupled with a non-stop from Singapore to Manado doing the trick.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we've only got TWO spots left available. (We've already got 15 others signed up to go.) So if this is of interest to you (now that the holidays are behind us and you have time to think), give us a call at 310/652-4990. Especially if you've never experienced this part of the world, you will come back with some amazing encounters that will live in your memory forever.

LIVEABOARD BOAT PROBLEMS OF LATE

There's an awful lot of relying on faith in this sport of ours. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. For me personally, I'm generally an optimistic person who tries to see the good in others, so the thought that some would take advantage of that, or not live up fully to their end of an agreement, is sometimes something that's hard for me to conceive. That holds true whether you're dealing locally with our SoCal stores and boats or dealing with foreign trips as well, whether land-based or liveaboard.

It starts when we sign up and begin paying for a trip, having faith that the boat or resort will be operational when we finally arrive for our trip. If you're not booking direct but going through a provider like Reef Seekers, you have faith that we'll have forwarded your money and will live up to our end of the bargain. That reliance on faith continues when we arrive to the destination, assuming the rooms will be clean, the air (or nitrox) will be pure, the food will be edible, safety measures are in place, and that the captain and crew generally know what they're do-

ing. There's simply an awful lot that goes into these trips that's out of our direct control and which we accept on faith.

By the same token, things happen that can upset what the original plan was. And it's important for you to be alert to that possibility and to have your what-could-go-wrong radar active to minimize disruption to what you've got planned. We offer some recent scenarios for you edification.

Let's start with a boat running aground. You'd think that if you regularly ply certain waters, that you'd know where everything is. I remember when we used to do *Great Escape* trips, Captain Tim Burke would refer to certain areas as having "sleeper" rocks which only revealed themselves at low tide or with the ebb of water, but which could easily damage or sink a boat if you didn't remember where they were.

So it's a bit concerning when you hear of not one but TWO Red Sea liveaboards running aground in the past few months. The *Seaphoria* hit a well-known reef around Thanksgiving and, a month before that, the *Royal Evolution* ran aground on a different well-known

2026-2027 DIVING VACATIONS

March 9-22, 2026 • Yap

July 1-14, 2026 • Indonesia

Sept. 2026 • Philippines

August, 2027 • Eclipse & dive

reef. In both cases there were no fatalities but all passengers had to be evacuated and, obviously, their trip was over. I have no direct information on what type of compensation was offered, if any, but the fact of the matter is that you've blocked out time and spent money to do a trip and even if you're offered a free trip and full airfare compensation to get home and then come back in the future, would you be willing to trust these operators again?

For something like this, the best you can do is to make sure you know where your key documents (passport, money, keys, plane tix, etc.) are so that you can take them with you if you have to leave suddenly. Find out what accommodations and transportation the boat is going to provide. Are they paying for hotels? Are they paying for gear lost? Are they offering a refund or simply a credit for future travel? Ideally, try to get these answers on-site rather than waiting until you get home.

There is no liveaboard scenario scarier than a fire at sea. In 2019 on the *Conception*, fire killed 34 people. A month later the *Red Sea Aggressor I* burned, killing one person. There have been other fires around the world since then. The latest one we know of happened on the *Yasawa Princess* which runs in the Maldives. While the other two fires I mentioned broke out in the middle of the night, this one started at 6PM. So at least everyone was awake. And it seems, based on the one picture of the burning vessel available, that the fire may have started in the galley/kitchen area. According to someone I know at the NTSB, boat fires typically start either in the engine

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED ACTIVITY	\$\$\$
Sat.	Jan. 3	Veterans Park	Navigation Made Easy	25
Wed.	7	--- CLASS ---	--- PHOTO WORKSHOP ---	25
Wed.	14	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	180
Thu.	22	Veterans Park	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE!!!
Sat.	31	Veterans Park	Surf Entries Made Easy	25
Wed.	Feb. 4	--- CLASS ---	--- NAUI NITROX ---	75
Wed.	11	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	180
Thu.	26	Veterans Park	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE!!!

room or the galley. This one resulted in no loss of life but all 17 passengers had to be evacuated and that was the end of their vacation.

So follow the steps outlined previously and try getting answers from the people on-site. For a boat, it makes sense to keep those key documents in a secure envelope or bag so you only have to grab one thing and then you go. It's also a good idea to try to get specific names and contact info of whoever is in charge of taking care of things post-incident.

Next: How do you handle a deliberate deception? That's a hard one to deal with and I'm not sure if there's any way to prepare for that ahead of time. This is where travel insurance will be worth its weight in gold. Get it for each trip you take, at least for the land or boat portions, if not the airfare as well. Generally this type of insurance runs anywhere from 5-10% of the overall trip cost, depending on how extensive you want the coverage to be. A great place to go for insurance shopping is the website www.insuremytrip.com as they act as a marketplace for various companies.

We've certainly seen instances over the years – the most recent being on our Maldives trip last year – where a diver suddenly can't go but they had travel insurance

that covered most of the costs. Many times the insurance covers all of the expenses of the trip, so the diver isn't out financially. (Bad enough when you suddenly can't go, but even worse when it costs you thousands of dollars.)

There's a real-time situation unfolding right now with a boat cancelling trips. We wrote about this last week. It seems to be happening with *Solmar V*, which has been running trips in Mexico – Sea of Cortez, Guadalupe, and Socorro – for years and years and years. But there seems to be something amiss as they've been cancelling trips at the last minute for over a month now.

It seems *Solmar* had a diver fatality in mid-November. That in and of itself is not all that unusual. Speculation is that the diver died due to an embolism. That would likely be the result of diver error. Not to sound too cavalier about it, but divers make mistakes all the time, sometimes fatal, but rarely are they the fault of the boat or dive operator. So that a boat would suddenly cease operating after something like this raises at least pink, if not red, flags.

While *Solmar* has been sending out a generic e-mail explanation for the cancellations, some of it just doesn't feel right. They talk about their crew being emotionally upset (understandable – but

give them time off and get some replacements in to run the trips) but then they mention how their investors and management have been affected and how they're re-organizing to deal with that. That part sounds suspicious. On top of that, various marine traffic tracking websites have no record of the boat moving for the last 34 days. That also seems a bit suspicious. And while their e-mail promises to be in touch with everyone and work things out for cancelled trips, who knows if that's the truth or they're simply buying time?

My advice, and others have said the same thing, would be that if you have a trip coming up on *Solmar V*, be careful about sending any payments until you can be assured that the boat is back up

and running. By the same token, if people scheduled to dive with them stop sending money, that obviously kills their cash flow which may lead them to insolvency and could create the very problem that everyone is hoping to avoid. There are certainly no easy answers and it's a horrible position for everyone be in.

There is certainly no 100% guarantee as to how to avoid these types of situations. Best advice is to deal with reputable companies (like Reef Seekers, hopefully) who will have your back if things start to go wrong. To that point, over 20 years ago, we had a travel wholesaler we dealt with regularly suddenly close their doors. We lost the money we'd sent them for a big trip, but we ate the financial loss.

Our thought was it wasn't the fault of our customers and even though it wasn't our fault either, we were going to maintain the trust of our customers. We decided that whatever money we lost was a small price to pay for integrity.

Overall, use your best judgment. If something feels off, it probably is. Investigate further but if you're not getting answers, back off and minimize your losses. I've been in the dive business for over 45 years and I can tell you that, for the most part, the people you'll deal with are honest, want you to have a good time, and really do enjoy taking you diving to insure that. But sometimes things go wrong and if you're prepared to deal with that possibility, the downside will hopefully be minimal.

PICTURE PAGE - Five Favs from 2025

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2026)



***Surge Wrasse
Easter Island***



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WWW.REEFSEEKERS.COM



***Toadfish
Roatan***



***Longnosed Hawkfish
Maldives (trip #1)***



***Red-toothed Triggerfish
Aquarium of the Pacific***



***Shark and escorts
Maldives (trip #2)***