



# What 's Bubbling

Club Newsletter

**Issue XXXI**

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## **Editorial**

There was a sudden flurry of activity in September as interest in diving revived. One weekend we had two trips out at once! One was a local south coast trip by Rik, the other Rob K's Lundy trip. See below for the latter.



The Dive Programme notes in the last issue were already out of date when they were printed. I only found out later that Jacky's Swanage trip had been postponed/relocated as Jacky was going to Lundy instead. On the same trip I found that Rob K had abandoned his Cyprus trip and was going to the Red Sea instead. If you do have any plans please let me know well in advance, and as soon as possible if the plans change.

See below Alan's note on T-shirts.

David Dooley

The views expressed in this magazine are those of the individual authors, not of the Committee or editor.

## **AGM**

Greg and Judy both report that the AGM will be held at the Northolt Community Centre at 19:30hrs. on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2000.

Be there!

It is your chance to have some say in how the club operates.



## Galapagos!

Unable to face the thought of overheated Florida Elizabeth & I booked a live-aboard for a week around the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador. It wasn't cheap, but it was worth the price.

40 or 50-foot whale sharks glided by at five-minute intervals, looking deceptively slow, until you tried to catch them. Hammerheads circled just off the 20 metre ledge, at times up to 15 visible at one time. Mixed in with them were Galapagos and Silky sharks. A lone seal lion shot past. Presently a turtle swam past and headed down the drop-off. On the rocks behind me morays lay at the bases of the boulders, or sometime out in the open. Shoals of fish circled nearer the ledge, retreating and regrouping as fast jacks menaced them. When my air got low I headed out from the ledge, ascending slowly whilst moving away from the shore for pick-up. A baby whale shark headed towards me, it was only about 30 feet long. I hovered at 6 metres as it made its way past, looking at the pattern on its side and then the remoras attached to the lazily waving tail. And all this was on just one dive off remote Wolf/Darwin Islands.



Of course it was not all good. For a photographer it was extremely frustrating. Most of the big animals kept just outside the limit of the range of my flashgun. The 3 metre swell pushed first one way, then a minute later the other way, even at over 20 metres. Off the ledge it did not matter, everything moved together with the water surge and the current. On the ledge one had to hold tightly on to barnacle encrusted rocks half the time. Occasionally mixing waters of different temperatures

made focussing impossible. Visibility was about 25 metres. By the time a whale shark was visible it was normally just too late to get close to it. If one stopped staring into the distance to spot the whale sharks approaching and started photographing the morays and reef fish then inevitably that was the time the next whale shark chose to appear.

We had started early in the morning, Heathrow for 07:00 hrs. Nine hours to Miami, 3 hours in Miami, then 4 hours to Quito, arriving at the hotel at midnight local time. Up for breakfast the next day at 07:00, then to the airport for the 2 hour flight to Baltra in the Galapagos Islands. After the inevitable delays and form filling it was on to the coach and then a rib out to Galapagos Aggressor 1, or as it is known locally, Jesus Del Gran Podor. Twin en suite cabins had been allocated in advance. I was a bit surprised to find that Elizabeth and I had been allocated one of the two upper deck cabins at wheelhouse level, rather than one down below.

The boat was well equipped, sun and upper decks, a large dining



room/lounge, a camera area above the kitting up deck at the stern, convenient kitting up and filling positions and a stern platform. Nitrox was available, but at a significant price for sterling area people. Most of other eight divers were Americans. All seemed friendly. Their ages ranged from twenties to about my age. Most of them had been on other Aggressor Fleet boats before.

The crew included two PADI Divemaster/official Galapagos guides and two boat handlers for the two ribs. A cook and steward provided high quality and ample meals as well as snack items. Local drinks and tea/coffee etc. were free and available at all times. Imported alcoholic drinks had to be paid for later. Briefings before dives were good, with diagrams of what to expect and avoid. Kitting up was the responsibility of the divers, but once the dive was over the crew handled all the bottles and weight belts. The Divemasters were available as buddies for any diver whose partner was unavailable for a dive, but it was a fairly distant buddy. I suspect the buddying would have been much closer had any of the divers seemed less competent.

The boat moved to the nearby site for the first test dive. This was one of only three sites with virtually no current or swell. Light aluminium cylinders necessitated two extra kilos of lead. The first dive, off the stern platform, was a little disappointing. There was little coral, as expected, but only 15 metres visibility. There were quite a few fish, but in small groups. There were also lots of urchins, but little crustacea and few anemones. We stayed there that night for the only night dive, getting closer to the fish and seeing more anemones, some molluscs and a lobster.

Next morning plans were restricted, as some of the American's luggage had failed to arrive. Hence the boat went to local sites to enable the luggage to be collected by rib later that day. We dived off two good sites around Seymour Island.

Visibility was much better, but the current was significant. The life made up for the current. I saw my first manta ray. There were also sealions zooming past, a dozen or so white tip reef sharks (sleeping until I pointed the camera at them) sleeping stingrays piled one on top of another, one eagle ray swimming, and fish in enormous numbers. At times fish completely covered one's field of vision in one direction.

Between dives we had a shore trip. Blue footed boobies and chicks, frigate birds and marine iguanas ignored us as we strolled by or stopped to stare only inches away.

That afternoon a rib brought the missing luggage over. We left on the long trip to the prime sites off isolated Wolf and Darwin islands that evening, arriving off Wolf around dawn.

The next three days the routine was similar. Four dives on the day we stayed off Darwin Island, three on the days we changed islands. Up at 06:30 for breakfast. First dive 08:30, snack, second dive 10:30, lunch 12:00, third dive 13:30, snack, fourth dive 16:00, evening meal 19:00. This maximised use of the 12 hours of daylight. At no time did my conservative American dive computer indicate any need for a stop, but a minute or three at 6 metres was part of each dive plan. Last dive had to start before 16:30 hours to allow daylight search time if anyone went too far astray. The boatmen relied on divers following the plan and surfacing in the right area. As a back up each diver was issued with a folding flag. Galapagos Aggressor 2 was in the general area in case extra help was needed.

The last dive off Wolf was a different type of site, a sloping sandy bottom with little swell or current. Beyond 28 metres were garden eels. What we went there for was to see the red-lipped batfish. This looked more like a frog than a fish. It is a bottom dweller with pectoral fins that have developed into front limbs for running across the bottom. Most similar species are only found in really deep water.

After 3 days off Wolf/Darwin we reluctantly motored away for a more leisurely return to the larger islands. First stop was Cousin's reef for a look at the endemic, and well camouflaged, Galapagos seahorse and a chance to see fur seals as well as sealions. Then there was a trip ashore on Bartolome Island

to see the volcanoes and climb to the lighthouse for the view. Next day it was Rocas Gordon, an old volcano crater, for a drift dive through pinnacles. This was mainly memorable for a shoal of golden rays. In the afternoon we went to Plaza to see the few penguins still there after the last El Nino, went ashore to see the land iguanas, and had a last dive in shallow waters where the sealions were abundant. As a finale we went ashore to the Darwin Research Station to see the giant tortoises, and then had a meal ashore.

The next day it was back to the local airport for the flight to Quito. We subsequently went by air over the Andes to the Amazon frontier town of Cocas. From Cocas it was motorised fast canoe fifty miles downriver, then walk, then dugout canoe to a jungle lodge. The Amazon rainforest was a disappointment. Living things apart from trees, lianas, large ants, bloodsucking horseflies and a few mosquitoes, were rare and shy. From a 150 foot high tree platform we saw one foot of a sloth the wrong side of the top of another tree. We saw a tarantula, the rear end of a retreating armadillo, two frogs and one snake. On the night canoe trip the caiman could not be found. We saw three types of monkey, but all at long range. After four nights we returned to Quito then the next day to England via Miami. In the long wait at Miami we went to the air-conditioned local museum to escape the heat outside.

I would recommend a live aboard in the Galapagos to anyone at or near dive leader standard. I have never seen so many big animals underwater before. Unlike most other places with big animals the region is reasonably politically and religiously stable.

Galapagos conditions vary during the year. We had ideal temperatures, but moderate winds, noticeable currents and significant swell. Mike (of Waterfront Warehouse-Have you got your discount card?) said that in October there was little swell but severe currents. Water temperature was 15°C whereas we had 19°C. He saw more hammerheads, which came closer, and more turtles. The Divemasters said that conditions vary, not always predictably, as the Galapagos is subject to different currents at different times of the year and different again in El Nino years. Places are limited on the better boats and must be booked over 6 months in advance.

Once in the Amazon rain forest was enough for me.

David Dooley

## Swanage - August 29

OR

### Sea Trials 2

After emailing around Rik had 15 divers for his planned trip to Swanage over the August Bank Holiday. However numbers promptly started to drop, first to 13, then down to 11 on the day. Elizabeth and I were in Hampshire for the weekend and took our inflatable with us for it's first outing since the guarantee repairs necessary after it's first trip.

Several of the party were in unusual summer plumage, wet suits or semi-dries in anticipation of warm water. In contrast Elizabeth and I were trying to remember how to operate dry suits after a score of wet suit dives.

Rendezvous was for 08:00 at pier or launch point. Elizabeth and I planned to be slightly early, as it was a long time since we had last assembled the inflatable. The day dawned well, no wind and mist, but the sun soon evaporated the mist, and increasing wind aided dispersal. Elizabeth and I arrived at 07:45 and commenced assembly. This did not go well. Choice of adapters for the inflation of floor/keel panels and the tubes by the electric pump is critical, and my initial choices were wrong. We also had a slight leak from the valve of one tube. By the time inflation and assembly was complete the ribs had been launched and disappeared. We hastily launched and went round to the pier, but there was no sign of the ribs. We then headed for the dive site, the Peveril Ledge Buoy. The wind had increased to force 3 to 4 from the West, in line with the shipping forecast of 3 to 4, locally 5. On the ledge it was bouncy. There were the normal overfalls of the tidal current over the ledges, but increased significantly as wind and tidal current were in opposite directions. By the time we got there the first pair of divers from each rib were in the water, enjoying the fast drift to the West. Rik volunteered to boat handle and Elizabeth and I kitted up to follow the first pairs.

Kitting up was "interesting", but eventually we dropped in and down. When we got down to 16 metres we could just see the bottom rushing past 2 metres below. We adjusted buoyancy and settled down to "flying" a few inches above the bottom, fins trailing and hanging down to maintain us in forward facing attitudes. As the dive progressed depth shallowed in stages, and speed increased appropriately. We did not see much, only sand and gravel at first. Later in the dive as we reached Durlston Bay there were small ledges, small seaweeds, small sponges, a few small wrasse, one Ballan wrasse and, according to Elizabeth, a dogfish. After the agreed 30 minutes (to ensure that we did not delay the second pairs of divers) we surfaced, 2 miles from our start position.

Rik returned to Judy and his rib to pick up his first pair and then dive. Meanwhile Jonathan, who was on his first sea dive this year, and Rob Willin were having a quiet time out of the current in Durlston Bay. They reported more life than Elizabeth and I saw. When Diane and Greg and the trio from the other rib had been dropped off Elizabeth and I returned to Swanage pier, as one tube was continuing to deflate, although very slowly. The ribs followed later.

I allowed the inflatable to beach in order to use the foot pump more easily. I wish to deny the rumour that I confused high water time with low water time! (For areas around the Solent low water time is easily measured and often quoted alone in preference to high water time because of the "double" high tides). Once beached it was a five-minute job to fully inflate the tubes and retighten the valves. The inflatable stayed fully inflated for the rest of the day. When the time came to depart Elizabeth, Rob, Greg and I simply carried the inflatable the few yards to the water.

On the pier we had a problem. Being a helpful chap, Rik had told everyone that only one tank need be brought as we could refill on the pier. So on

Sunday the pier compressors would not start because of an electrical fault with the main's switch in their fuse box.

Rik had planned the second dive as a shallow drift off Ballard. I persuaded the pier shop to fill Elizabeth and my first dive bottles from the reserve in the compressor bank. The 160 bar would be more than enough for us for shallow dives. Rik did an inventory of what spare bottles the group had and how we could decant using my twin-set bar to get enough part-full tanks for everyone. We got as far as equalising a full and a half-full bottle and getting spare bottles together from those whom had brought them.

Meanwhile it had been suggested that if the fuse box was opened and the internal switch then switched on and the box closed then the compressor might work. This is probably severely contrary to health and safety regulations, but it was done and the compressor duly operated. Our remaining tanks were filled for free by the grateful pier shop personnel.

We set off for the second dive at about 15:30. Swanage bay was quickly crossed with the favourable wind and tide helping. First pairs were put in, and then Rik again took the inflatable for Elizabeth and me to dive. We had hoped that it would be near low water slack, but the current was running at 1 to 2 knots to the East. We saw a bit more, but still with only 2 metre visibility. There were fanworms, edible and swimming crabs, small wrasse and snakelock anemones. The highlight of the dive was a whole shoal of half-grown Pollack crossing our course at a shallow angle. We were nearly at Old Harry by the time we surfaced half an hour later. First pairs were recovered and the last pair and threesome dropped in.

A quarter of an hour later we watched helplessly from the surface as Judy and Rik's SMB headed inexorably for a lobster pot buoy. We started making bets on whether they would hold onto the SMB and swing in an arc to the surface, or leave the SMB and surface at controlled speed. In the event they seemed to do both, surfacing a few seconds and ten or more metres apart. Rik was picked up first while Elizabeth and I stayed by Judy because of the boat traffic past. Then the rib picked up Judy while Elizabeth and I retrieved Rik's SMB and reel.

We waited while Rik disentangled his SMB line and the other rib's divers completed their dive. Then all headed back into tide and wind to Swanage pier and the launching site. Wind had increased to force 5 or so, which was a good test of the repairs to the inflatable. It went well, with no visible damage, although in the conditions I had slowed down to a lower speed than the longer ribs, especially when we reached a choppy area where winds funnelled from either side of Swanage met.

Elizabeth and I landed and deflated and packed the inflatable and gear and were ready to leave at the same time as the ribs.

It had been a bright sunny day and exposure to this and the wind left a party of divers somewhat red-faced down to neck seal levels, to return home.

David Dooley