

An underwater photograph of a vibrant coral reef. A large, branching coral structure with bright yellow tips and deep red stems grows from a light-colored, porous rock. The background is a clear, deep blue ocean with several small, dark fish swimming in the distance.

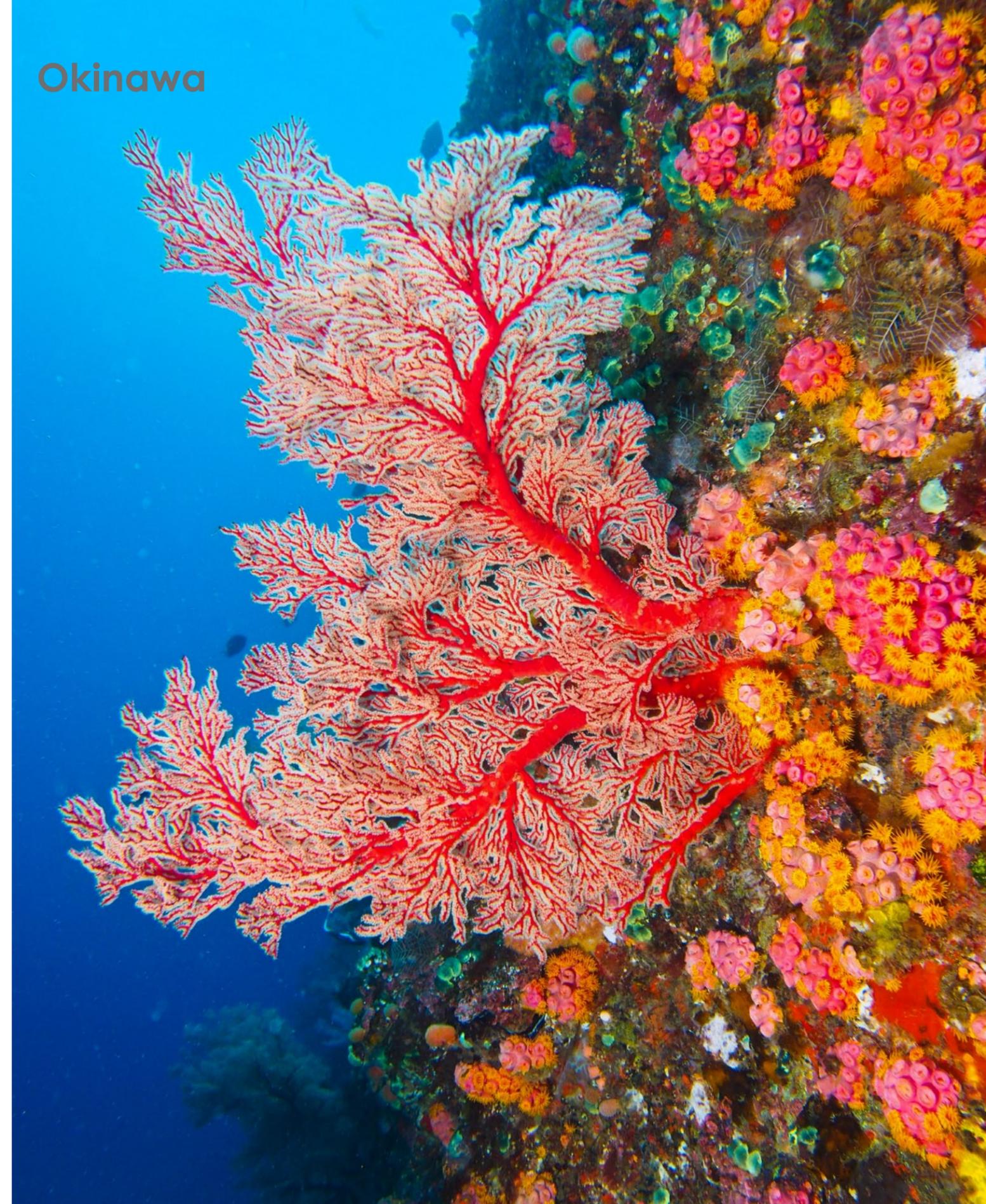
Text and photos by Farhat Jah

# Okinawa

*—Diving the Kerama Islands of Japan*



Okinawa



The rugged landscape of Okinawa makes the island look a lot like the western isles of Scotland

Text and photos by Farhat Jah

**Okinawa—**simply saying the name has so many connotations. The island itself is huge, and yet it's an oceanic island far from the Asian continent. It takes two and half hours to fly from Hong Kong, the closest point on mainland China, to get here. The main Japanese islands are even further away, with Tokyo a good three-hour jet flight from Naha International Airport. Ostensibly part of Japan, Okinawa is very different from the main islands of the country. The air and sea temperature are warmer and the atmosphere is very different. The people are slower—the traffic and the public transport, basically non-existent.

Sea fans are abundant on Okinawa reefs; *Pseudoceros ferrugineus* flatworm (left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Yellow gargonian





THIS PAGE: Topsy scenes of life in Okinawa, where military planes can be seen flying overhead to and from the U.S. military base

In the south, Ishigaki is the biggest island in the Yaeyama group with a small city, a large naval base disguised as a coastguard facility, a series of beaches, resorts and an airport that can handle the 737 jets. Irimote is a larger island of primal jungle and a hundred nautical miles to the west is Yonaguni Island (ed.— featured in *X-RAY MAG* #54.)

### History

Okinawa's history is prevalent. Okinawa itself has scores of islands around what the locals euphemistically call the mainland. Originally called the Ryukyu Kingdom and independent from Japan, the islands were brought under Japanese control before WWII. The second World

War has indescribably shaped Okinawa ever since.

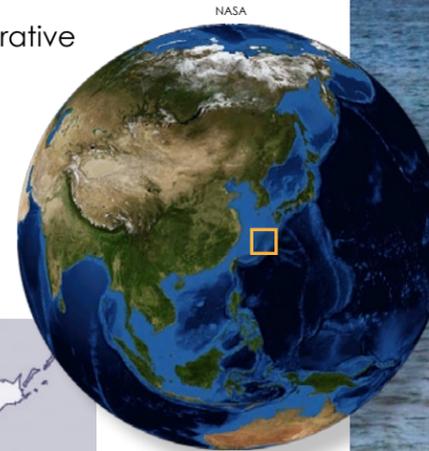
The American forces needed an island with which to bomb Tokyo, and so took Iwo Jima and Okinawa Jima. The battles were

long and bloody and explain the total devastation of Naha. The United States then went on to rule Okinawa until well after my own birthday in 1971.

In the early 1970s, Okinawa had a referendum in which the Okinawans were given the choice of reverting to the Ryukyu Kingdom and independence, joining Japan or becoming a U.S. protectorate. The vote was precariously close with many voting to remain with the United States. To this day, some Okinawans grumble about the authenticity of the vote.

In 1973, the islands were handed over to Japan, and the whole of Okinawa with ancillary islands became a prefecture of Japan. Regardless

of administrative power, the United States kept their military bases and



ABOVE: Global map with location of Okinawa, Japan  
LEFT: Location of Okinawa on map of Japan

Japan has a plethora of Pacific Ocean islands that are unknown to the world. There are three main sets of islands south of Kyushu: the Nansei Islands, the Sakishima Islands and the Yaeyama Islands.

thousands of personnel on the islands.

In 1990, a young U.S. Marine called Doug Bennett was posted to Okinawa. He liked the people,

and he liked the diving. When he tired of protecting his nation's interests in Africa and Japan, he returned to Okinawa in 1995 and opened a new dive operation called Reef Encounters. Doug's

center became a ground-breaking business.

Japanese dive centres cater mainly to Japanese clients. They dive the Japanese style, with 30-minute, highly rigid guided dives.





Sunset over Sunabe Sea Wall



Lionfish at Sunabe Sea Wall

Diver swims over Sunabe Sea Wall, covered in an array of coral growth

**Diving**

We arrived in Naha Airport on a blustery day. Doug's youngest instructor, Daisuke, arrived to collect us. As we drove up north to Chatan, he briefed us on his surprisingly very positive take on Okinawa and the United States.

"When you see the demo's, it's just the same few people," said Daisuke. "The Americans are a huge part of the economy here, and they are generally very polite and nice people."

Our hotel was more like a motel in that the reception was tiny but the rooms huge. They were very American in their make up, with kitchenettes, microwave, bedrooms, lounges, and TV's.

"This used to be U.S. officers'

accommodation for Kadena Airbase," Doug later told me.

The next morning, we arrived at the dive centre very late. Huffing and puffing, lugging our cold water gear, we had misjudged the distance from the hotel. Daisuke was amused and not bothered.

"Doug had to go to a meeting," said Daisuke. "He told me that I should take you to the Sunabe Sea Wall."

**Sunabe Sea Wall.** We loaded the Reef Encounters minibus with our kit and tanks and drove back to our hotel. We kitted up and climbed over the sea defence wall and walked over the reef top to drop in. This was weird—we were diving off a road, on the exact same place where the U.S.



forces had landed on the island.

The reef started just below the surface of the water. We entered by lying on our backs and paddling a few metres until we reached the edge of a long "cut" or channel that was about ten metres deep. We descended to eight metres and started to move along the sandy bottom.

I gasped. The water was a chilly

21°C. I had no name 5mm Cambodian wetsuit combination that I had picked up in Istanbul on the cheap. It was good enough—my hood did its job, and I felt okay. The cold water seeped up my legs and arms, but 20-21°C was not cold enough to make it unpleasant. I twisted the bezel on my momentum dive watch. At least I did not have to wear gloves, I thought to myself.

In order to access the deeper water, we had to swim out through the cut. This was not at all onerous, as the walls were paced with hard and soft coral and abounded with fish. Daisuke tried to gather us together



Saddled toby (above); Hector's reef goby (left)





Scorpionfish hiding in reef (left); Hard coral cover on reef (above)

some other hapless diver. The experience while disconcerting was quite unique.

Eventually, Daisuke managed to herd us out of the cut, and we popped out and turned right.

Okinawa is famous amongst the knowledgeable diving community for its macro life. I was expecting the scores of nudibranches and tube worms that we did see, but I found myself astounded by the marine life. Schools of small jacks and fusiliers sped by. The visibility has been promised to be ten metres, but even on this grey day, I could see 20m.

The soft coral was as exquisite and colourful as any in southeast Asia. It waved gently in the sea action, as we swam by. The end of the cut made a natural north-south facing wall,

but spurs of reef stuck out to sea in an easterly direction. These made for long shallow walls that started at 10m depth and went down to 20m.

Daisuke now came into his own. He knew exactly where we were, took us along the reef spurs into deeper and deeper water. Then we headed off into the blue to find a coral bommie packed with anthias, nudibranches, moray eels, and "critters various".

My air was not doing well with the excitement and the photography. I signalled Daisuke, and he led us back to the sea wall. We climbed out as a pair of F22 Raptors flew overhead and landed at Kadena.

We switched tanks over and had



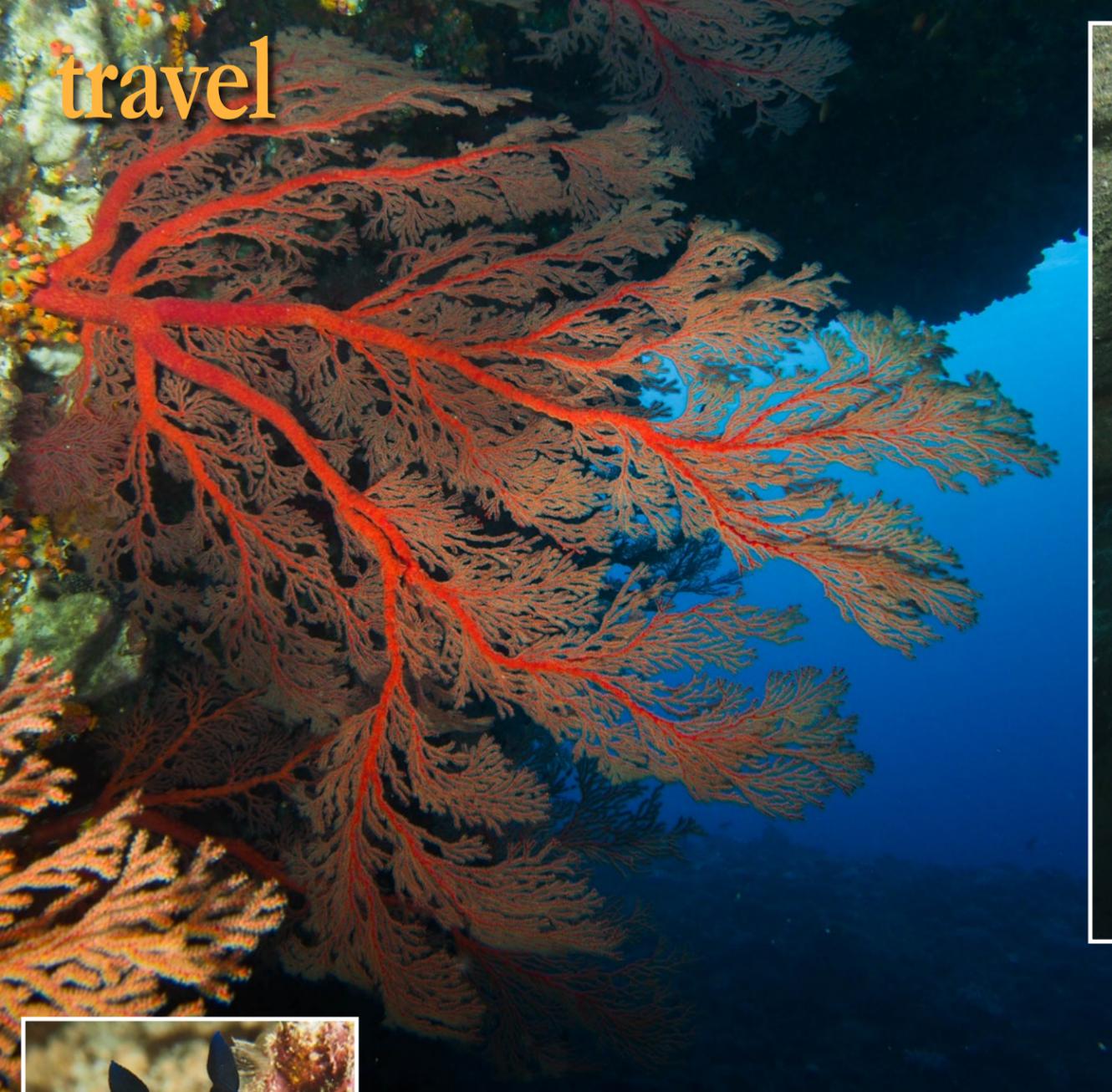
Chromodoris nudibranch

and lead us out, but I was mesmerised by some nudibranches and had my Olympus OMD snapping away happily.

Doug had briefed Daisuke well, and he gave me the leeway a photographer so craves. A highly venomous sea snake came by, and to my consternation, found me mesmerising. It played below me and then swirled around my legs giving me some excellent photo opportunities, but doing nothing for my air consumption! Eventually it left me in peace, and went off to play with



Cardinalfish at Sunabe Sea Wall



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Large sea fan on reef wall; Pinnate batfish under ledge; Soft coral on reef wall; Nembrotha nudibranch (inset)

an *onigiri* for lunch—a ball of rice wrapped in seaweed with a salmon interior. A Hercules sailed lazily by as Daisuke told us that a decent interval had ensued.

We strapped our tanks on, I adjusted my bezel and swam out to repeat the experience. This time, we did not turn right but left. Again my air did not last as long as I would have liked. As we climbed out a second time, I was left feeling that I had barely touched the surface of the Sunabe Sea Wall diving area.

**House Reef.** Without wishing to sound overly dramatic, I was simply

blown away by what could only be described as Okinawa's house reef. Sure it was only 22m deep, it lacked massive pelagic action but under the flight path of a U.S. airbase and diving the most dived site in Okinawa, (which was still not crowded), we were presented with impressive tropical diving.

**Kerama Islands.** The Sunabe Sea Wall is one of the many dive sites on Okinawa, but the Kerama Islands—20 miles off the east coast of the Okinawa mainland—were reputed to be the special dive location of the Northern Ryukyu.

Reef Encounters has an impressive Taiwanese dive boat that looks suspiciously like a Bertram. A team of us were now assembled—Scots, English, American—along with our Japanese guides, Daisuke and Toyo. Doug was our skipper, and we assembled at the marina early in the morning. The weather was idyllic but the sun had not come out.

"I cannot believe this is February, man," Doug muttered, as our twin diesel engines opened up, and we

steamed into the channel. I sat on the flying bridge, ostensibly taking photos, but really just chatting to Doug, picking his brains about the Ryukyu Islands.

These islands and their beauty fascinated me. Their size was massive, and yet the Japanese had built carefully and with some taste. Naha was a city but a small

city, and the resorts on the northern coast were built with an eye to blend into the greenery. The only downside of Okinawa was that the tourism infrastructure was almost entirely designed for the Japanese.

The presence of the U.S. forces had created an English speaking section of the Japanese populous who made their business serving





Okinawa



LEFT TO RIGHT: Spotted grouper; Soft coral growth on reef; Brilliant yellow gorgonian

**Okinawa: Diving's best kept secret**

Organising diving adventures in Yonaguni and the Okinawa Islands



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Americans. These people were only too happy to adapt their services for tourists.

What made it all work was the sheer friendliness of the Okinawans. When we took a bus somewhere, the bus driver would explain in single words or hand signals what we needed to do next. Where communication failed, the sheer goodwill of the average Okinawan would bridge the gap—and we, as tourists, always felt extremely welcome and safe to get lost.

My thoughts were interrupted as a series of rocks appeared at the side of the boat. Classic Okinawa fishing boats sat at the edge of a clear light-green reef, with the men casting their nets as they always have. Away from the reef, the water was a gorgeous blue.

We motored slowly on around the reefs and between some islands.

"Some say there are 27 Islands here and some say five," Doug

drawled. "It sort of depends upon how high the tide is."

"How many dive sites do you have?" I asked.

"Oh about 200," he replied nonchalantly. We were only to do three this day.

We circled a large rock masquerading as an island. Goats strolled around on the steep grass that came down to black rock cliffs.

**Kuroshima.** Doug stopped the boat and moored up. We rolled into the water—between twin rocks—a site called Kuroshima. We dived along a wall that led off onto a spur, which joined onto one of the other rocks making an island. Daisuke took his divers around the island, but we could not get past the main coral strewn wall.

The water was clear with 30m visible in all directions. Small yellow soft corals were surrounded by angelfish.

We descended lower and lower to some emperor angelfish that were sitting at depth—around a fan coral. They watched us lazily, not bothered by our

appearance at all. I snapped them, and the twin flashes of my camera popped and lit them dramatically.

I looked at my gauge. We had reached

32m. My computer was downcalculating rapidly, and I did not really want to go into decompression. I signalled my dive buddy, Cisca, and asked what she





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Varicose phyllid nudibranch under sea fan; Big-eye squirrelfish under ledge; Lush sea fans and anthias decorate a reef wall; Diver in swimthrough

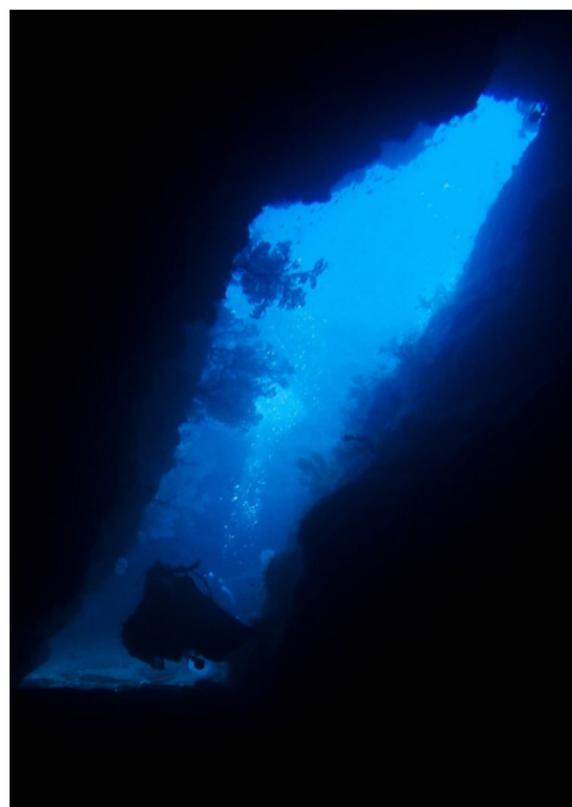
in this shallow location, but in our thick suits and heavy weights, every movement was an effort and my air consumption was hammered.

We swam back to the top of a coral cliff where the boat was moored and went to do our safety stops.

**Azu's Cave.** Our next dive was on a large square rock in the middle of the ocean. Named Azu's Cave, it was marked by a black and white post warning passing boats about the rock. The sea had picked up slightly, and we dropped in and entered the rock.

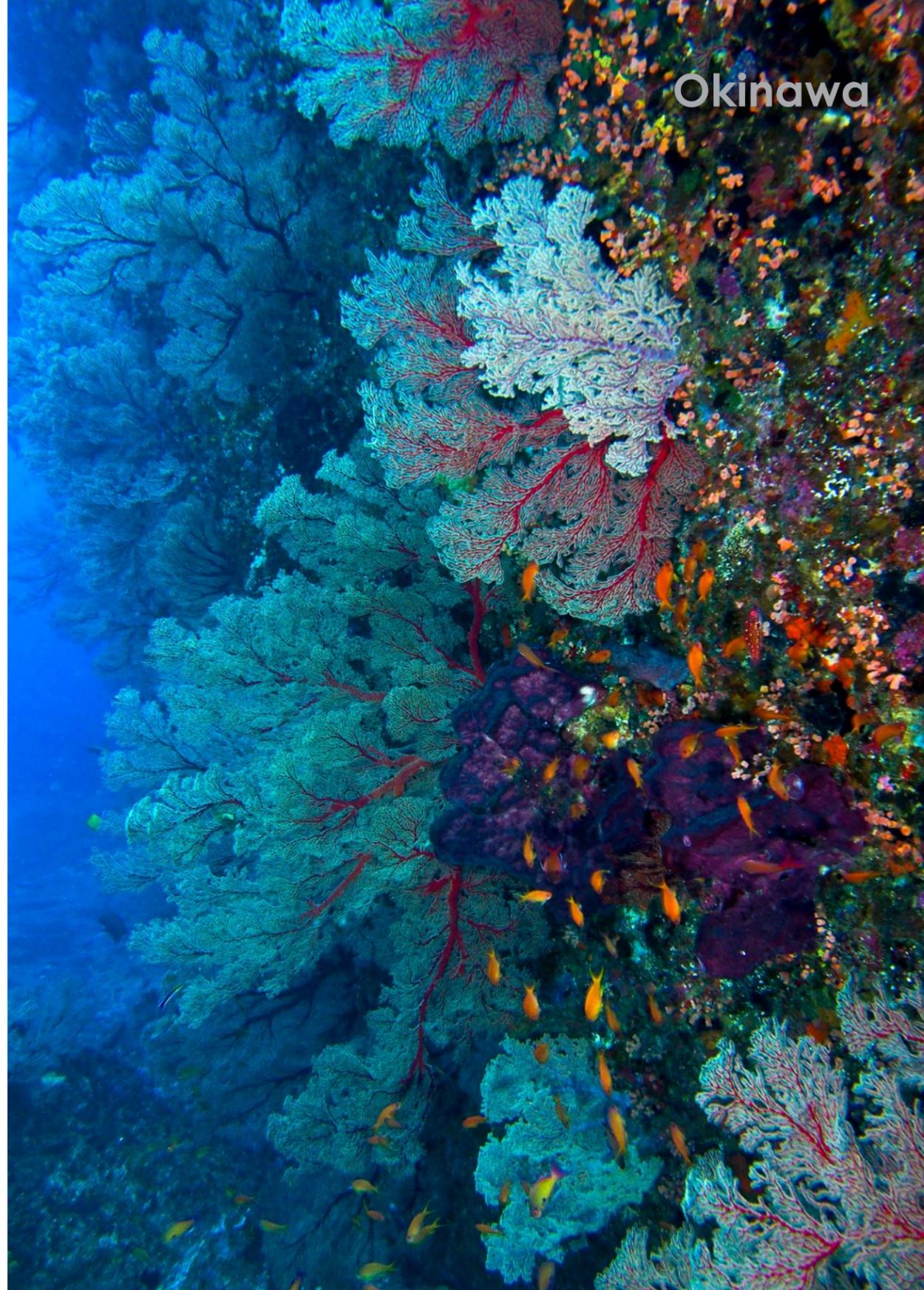
We literally swam 20 metres through the most dramatic swim-through. All the way along the tunnel emperor angelfish mingled around the large gorgonian sea fans. I kept stopping to look up, with my strobes on torch mode. I felt I could spend half an hour in here alone, but I did not want to test Daisuke's patience.

As we exited the cave, Daisuke led



the group forward. He motioned me and asked if we wanted to join. We could not. The rock was so large, and such a magnet of life, that we opted to stay there.

As he headed off, we circled it, slowly



at 20m depth, taking in the fan corals and fish. Daisuke had headed off down a sand river; I noted it for future reference, waved and he was gone.

The surge pushed us around the rock. This was big boys diving. It took all of our skill to stay stable and enjoy what we were looking at. Lionfish crawled all



Diver follows the trail of a 'sand river' underwater

## Okinawa

### PLANNING YOUR TRIP:

The Kerama Islands are a hidden gem. Famous in Japan for their diving, they are a world-class destination with sharks, manta rays, orcas, schools of fish and macro creatures.

Japan, however, is unique. The public transport on the mainland is excellent, but in Okinawa, it is non-existent. You will end up hauling your kit all over airports train stations, and often enough, down the street. Divers are encouraged to take a single wheelie bag and keep kit down to a minimum, such as regulator, suit, mask and fins. Reef Encounters has excellent Aqua Lung BCD's and regulators.

Spring and summer are idyllic with tropical water and air temperatures. Dive operator, Doug Bennett, of Reef Encounters knows the Ryukyu Islands like no other diver. He and his team do packages to Okinawa, Irimote, Ishigaki and have tie-ups with local hotels of all comfort levels.

We also travelled on the main islands of Japan with the excellent Inside Japan Tours. They organised our entire itinerary from trains to planes to busses. They also do dive packages in conjunction with Reef Encounters and others. With their contracts and contacts, they are often cheaper than doing it independently. Registered in the United Kingdom and abroad, they are a first class outfit that knows Japan. You must, however, tell them that you are a diver and carrying dive gear. They will tailor your journey accordingly.

The Japan specialists offer a range of dive packages across the sub-tropical islands and the mainland to include the Iseki Stones of Yonaguni, the manta rays of Ishigaki, coral and stunning visibility in Okinawa and hammerhead sharks off the Izu Peninsula. InsideJapan fully tailors dive packages to suit all time frames, budgets and interests. ■



Banded sea snake (top left); Resting scorpionfish (left)

over one wall and soft coral and fans on the other—the leeward sides of the rock being more alive than the others.

After our circuit, we thought we should follow Daisuke. I thought I had selected the correct sand river and finned slowly up the coral trench. In this way, we kept our selves away from the current. Schools of jacks and emperors sped by clearly minding their own business. When our air was getting low, I looked around. There was simply nowhere to do a multi-level dive—nowhere to do a stop and look at anything. So, I sent a buoy to the surface, and we ascended to stop.

We surfaced, and the weather had taken a definite turn for the worse. I looked around and inflated my BCD even more. I could now see for miles. I saw a spot and waved the SMB. The boat was there, and turned towards us.

"Sorry dude," Doug shouted from the bridge. "The others came up miles away

and then a pod of whales turned up so we watched them."

"No stress," I gasped, as I climbed up the ladder laden down with my kit. "The dive was awesome, and we knew you were coming."

**Nagando Reef.** The weather had turned, and Doug wanted to be closer to home. Doug took us to Nagando Reef, North Wall, where we all jumped into 18m water and landed on a reef. We were in full drift.

This time, we stayed glued to Daisuke and sped along the reefs and sand.

A sea snake followed us for a while, and then a reef shark appeared. It swam alongside us and then wandered off on its own business. In the midst of the dive, we

was almost stormy. I climbed back onto the boat with the others, and we steamed the last few miles home.

**Afterthoughts**  
A few days later Daisuke was roped into dropping us off at Naha Airport. It was sad saying goodbye to the Reef Encounters team; they were excellent professional divers who guided us and others through calm and advanced diving. They were super safe and took the time to demystify Okinawa for us. ■

spotted a leaf fish and had the interesting experience of trying to shoot a macro photo in a three knot current. I think I just about managed it.

By the time we surfaced, we had covered an impressive distance, and it

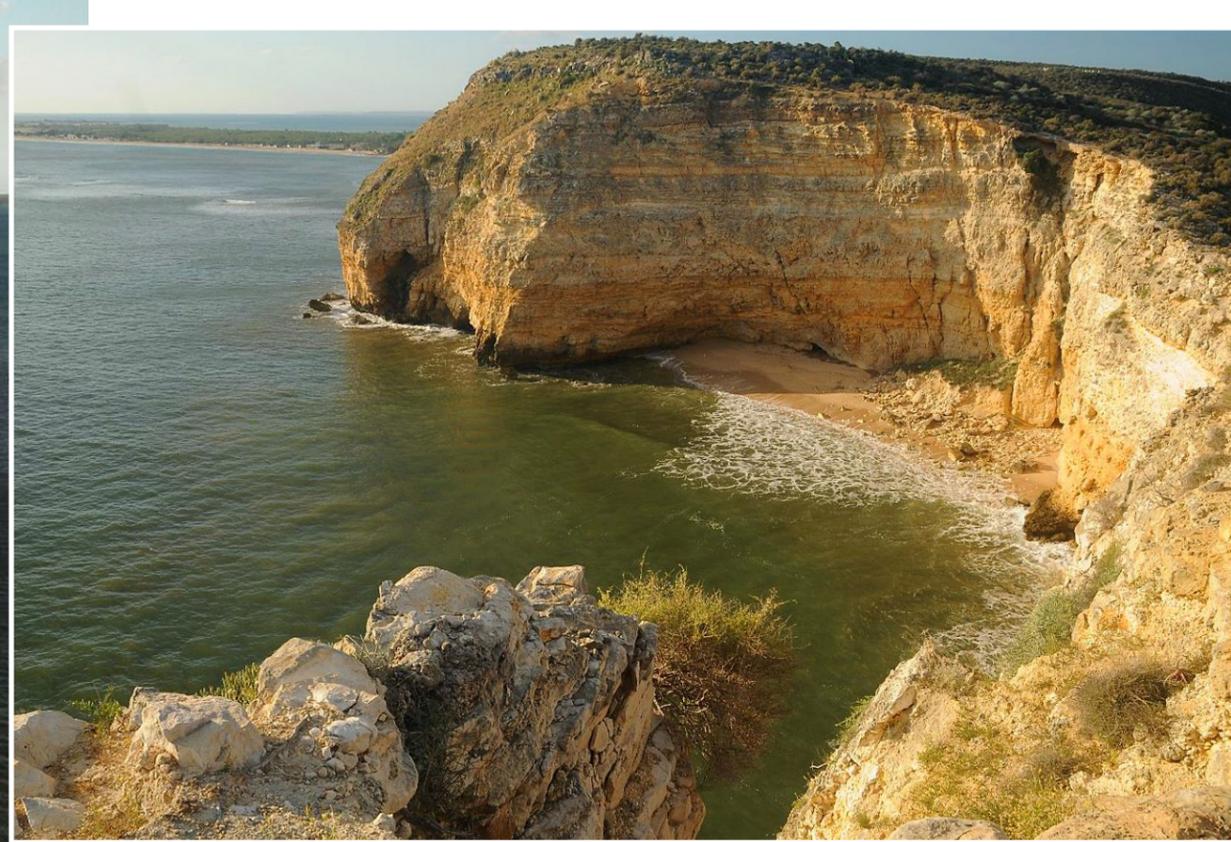
*Farhat Jah is a dive writer and underwater photographer based in Pemba, Tanzania. He leads specialist dive safaris around the globe and operates a dive resort on the island of Pemba. For more information, visit: [Orientafrica.com](http://Orientafrica.com)*



Text and photos by Pierre Constant

# Madagascar

— *Diving Sinkholes & Caves on the Mahafaly Plateau*



Cargo passenger canoe, Onilahy River (above) and limestone cliffs (top), St Augustin



Entrance to Binabe Cave (above) is at bottom of cliff; Limestone cliff of the Mahafaly Plateau in St Augustin (top). PREVIOUS PAGE: The Mahafaly Plateau bush, with bottle baobab trees and *Alluaudia*

Text and photos by Pierre Constant

Stretching west and north of the Isalo Ranges, the Mahafaly Plateau runs like a dragon's tongue to the very tip of Madagascar's southwest coast. This is a remote country in the Great South, where numerous historical shipwrecks have lain below the waves since the 16th century. Created in the geological Eocene times, the limestone table is rather conspicuous when seen in Saint Augustin, south of Tulear. It conceals an extensive run-off of underground water, judging by the numerous springs encountered in the lower valley of the mighty Onilahy River.

The Mahafaly Plateau has been affected by post-Eocene tectonic movements with a northwest-southeast distension, which tops an older tectonic event on the underlying substrate. Seismic activity is a common occurrence there. The karst process is intense in the lower Eocene with very deep caving systems, whereas in the mid-Eocene, sinkholes are only visible.

A number of these sinkholes, or *avens* as they are locally known in the French language, were brought to light by aerial photography taken by the French (Battestini 1964, IGN 1966). Looking like cauldrons, these collapsed sinkholes, round or oval in shape, mea-

sure anything from a few dozen metres up to 500 metres in diameter, with depths ranging from 40m to over 100m. They are natural wonders that make one hold one's breath for a minute.

**Tsimanampetsotse National Park**  
Crossing the Bay of St Augustine on a flat sea, our speedboat made a beeline to Anakao, a Vezo fishermen village under the sun. The white beach was fringed by a turquoise green lagoon, cradled between the historic

# feature

Nosy Ve Island and the mainland. It looked like a picture perfect postcard, with local outrigger canoes sailing back and forth on their fishing trips—an impression of paradise rediscovered.

A coastal track follows the west coast 56km to Efoetsy—gateway to Tsimanampetsotse National



## Madagascar



The 66m-deep sinkhole of Androinpany at Itampolo

Park, whose exquisite Malagasy name means, “there are no dolphins”. A nature reserve created in 1928 during the French colonial administration, the park is comprised of a huge lake—15km long and 2km wide—equaling a surface of 3,750 hectares, home to two species of flamingoes. The natural reservoir is fed by the springs coming out of the cliff, and by the avens as well.

A few caves and spectacular sinkholes are found in the park, home to giant banyans. Amazing roots climb down into the holes in search of water.

At Mitoho Cave, a small lake hosts some albino Eleotrid blind fish—pink and white—of the *Typhleotris* genus. These small creatures timidly skim the surface.

The hour-and-a-half loop circuit of

Tsiamaso (meaning “without eyes” and related to spirits) allows access to the cave of Andranolovy where a huge five-stemmed Madagascar palm tree (*Pachypodium geayi*) guards the entrance.

A stone's throw away, one comes to the aven of Vintany where a curtain of roots of the aviavy tree spill down like a waterfall to the existing water table. A bit further along, the lone baobab (*Andansonia rubrostipa*), or “grand mère”, puffed up and covered with open warts, stands still like a matriarch lost in time.

The dirt road continues south into white sand, across an arid, sun-parched countryside. The spiny bush is a landscape composed of almond green silver thicket (*Euphorbia stenodacla*), with thorny branches, and rather exotic octopus trees of the *Didieracae* genus, which look like candelabra cactus. However, their trunks are made of wood, covered with spines and also tiny leaves.

### Itampolo

The town of Itampolo, a name meaning “ten cameleons”, is another two hours further. Beyond the picturesque fishing village and the idyllic beach on the waterfront, the attraction here lays in the



The sea-shore at Itampolo (far left); Vezo outrigger canoes out for a fishing day, Itampolo (above); Vezo boys in a fishing canoe (left)

existence of two sinkholes worth visiting.

Avintany, in the lowlands, is an aven ten metres deep, full of water and accessible only through the roots of an aviavy tree. The clear water of the lake is enticing. The cream coloured limestone cliff is quite hard, present with flintstones, sandstone and sedimentary tuffs.

A second aven named Androinpany is found 5km inland, on the top of the Mahafaly Plateau, hidden in a forest of spiny *Alluaudia*, a species of octopus tree. Androinpany is a circular pit, 15 metres across, with sheer walls that plunge down to 66 metres in one drop. Impressive enough, it is inhabited by a

couple of maki lemurs, which live in cracks near the entrance of the sinkhole. The site is also home to rather inquisitive black vasa parrots and a couple of kestrel falcons.

“Some years ago, two Portuguese men came here with ropes and climbed down to the bottom,” said our guide, Dongary. I could make out a pile of debris at the centre of the sinkhole, with a ring of water indicating a possible cave underground.

Intrigued by these fascinating sinkholes, I returned to Itampolo four times in the course of two years.





## Madagascar

### VOAY ROBUSTUS IDENTIFICATION

Research done by Christopher Brochu in 2006 showed that a fossil specimen identified by Grandidier and Vaillant in 1872 belonged to a distinct species. *Voay robustus* is indeed an extinct species of horned crocodile from the Quaternary period—ranging from the Pleistocene (20,000 years ago) to the Holocene period—and related to the living African dwarf crocodile, *Osteolaemus tetraspis*, one of the smallest and least aquatic crocodylians.

Besides their small size, morphological characteristics include prominent triangular horns behind squamosals, dorso-ventrally deep snout and near exclusion of the nasals from external naris.

The ancestor of *Voay* must have rafted or swum across from mainland Africa, long after the separation of the big island from the continent during the Jurassic period. An endemic radiation occurred in Australasia at the same time.

*Osteolaemus tetraspis*, or African dwarf crocodile, were commonly found in forested settings, avoiding saline and brackish water. Their absence in marginal marine habitats reflects competitive exclusion by the larger *Crocodylus niloticus*.

But here's the 10,000-dollar question: "Was the extinction of *Voay robustus* related to the arrival of humans 2,000 years ago? Or was it due to predation from the larger *Crocodylus niloticus*?" ■



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Pierre Constant prepares for a dive in Avintany; Avintany sinkhole, with aviavy roots climbing down; New species of brown blindfish, *Typhleotris mararybe*; Copper brown blindfish under overhang

ment with a rope and a camera in a bucket, then climbed down the roots of the aviavy tree like a lemur 'holding onto dear life'. The initial snorkel around the pit indicated a depth of 10m around a central mound crested with green vegetation—a mini forest of stems with whiskers.

Prehistoric looking, brownish copper blindfish, *Typhleotris mararybe*, (identified as a new species in December 2012) with a duck beak, swam about under

the overhangs in the shallows, together with what looked like an aquatic mantis (water scorpion). Streams of bubbles

rose from the sedimentary floor in places, proof of ancient volcanic activity.

Subsequent scuba dives revealed caves in the north, south and east ends. The larger, most accessible being the former one, which extended to 80m over a lunar landscape of silt ridges, down to a depth of 25m.

Bumping into a solid wall at the far end, I noticed a deeper passage that sank down to 30m, in a sort of bottleneck crowned with white sediments—a 'no-no' for a solo diver to attempt. At the top of the passage, dug into the silt, I gazed upon some blackened bones—vertebras of what could be an elephant bird (*Aepyornis*) or a crocodile tail.

For the Malagasy people, these avens are *fady*, which means *taboo* or *sacred* in the local tongue. Locals are afraid

of them, for they believe dreadful spirits inhabit them. Others come here to practice rituals—including the sacrifice of a black rooster or a goat—and bring offerings, such as a bottle of rum, cigarettes or money. "Women pray for fecundity, in the hope to have a child," I was told.



Vertebra of, most-likely, a dwarf crocodile, at 25m depth

### Binabe Cave

The sun is at its apex when I left Tulear in a wrecked taxi, held together only by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Shortly, we sighted Sarudrano Spring. One hour later, a white signboard indicated with an arrow, "Binabe, grotte sacrée"—a sacred cave it is.

This is where, in search of the place a few months ago, I had climbed on top of



### Avintany sinkhole

At Avintany, which is 34m by 22m across, I lowered a scuba tank and dive equip-



## Madagascar

View of the mouth of Binabe Cave from inside (far left) and from underwater (left); Chimney going down to 31m (lower left); Entrance pond lit by sunbeams (below)



enchantment, from the nearby village. “Five thousand ariary for the two of you,” he demanded at once.

Tank on my back, camera bag strapped across the shoulder, Nikonos V at arm's length and a dive bag on the other shoulder, I followed in his footsteps for a ten-minute walk into the bush, expedition member, Christina, in tow with my fins and knapsack. An awesome sight, the cliff appeared 20 metres high, looming forward and reflecting a yellowish white light. I was already sweating profusely.

The trail snaked its way down a rubble slope with scattered rocks, into the shade of a hole. The few sunbeams striking through a pool of freshwater created a beautiful jewel blue aura. Nevertheless, I was filled with a bit of

fear at the thought of venturing into the dark unknown.

Moving through the water stirred up black sediment right away, which was, in fact, bat guano. Great caution would have to be used to avoid disturbing the visibility.

Under the surface, some small dark brown blind fish moved about shyly. Some time later, I noticed a bigger fish, 15cm to 20cm long, with two dorsal fins and a rounded caudal fin with a pointed tip, which looked just like a flame at the back of a rocket. My attempt to approach it was made in vain, as it fled in a flash! This one was certainly not blind.

Sinking in the depths,



Femur of an extinct dwarf hippo

I observed tiny crabs—1cm long—in the water column, then large shrimps 5cm to 10cm long, on the guano slope, quite intrigued by my other worldly appearance.

The bottom plummeted gradually east, opening into a vast chamber about 20 metres wide. I came to a dead end at a depth of 33 metres. The wall was soft and crumbled easily. The cave floor was like a dark desert, mottled like salt and pepper, and crisscrossed by tiny tracks of mysterious critters. Isolated specimens of blind fish cruised by at random over the guano landscape.

Making my way up along the north side,

I gazed upon what looked like a blackened fossil cast into the wall. I took a photo for memory. The dive into Binabe Cave lasted 30 minutes, and the water temperature was 26°C. At all times, I could

see the light from the surface.

A few months later, I returned for another exploratory dive, and found—at a depth of 25 metres—the femur of an extinct species of dwarf hippopota-





Vintany sinkhole with access vine (far left); Pink and white blindfish, Mitoho Cave (left); Mouse lemur (center inset); Guide Nicolas with giant Madagascar *Pachypodium*, Tsimanam-petsotse National Park (lower left)

2012, 16 years after Jean Michel Cousteau went in with his team.

blindfish, *Typhleotris madagascariensis*, were swimming upside down at the surface, as if trying to breathe: "It's impossible to dive here—the site is forbidden."

A stone's throw away was the aven of Filomeni, which was a narrow pit, maybe 2m in diameter, where roots of an aviavy tree plunged down vertically to an unknown depth. Penetration was risky and impossible without the proper gear. A fortiori—"The site is inhabited by spirits," explained Nicolas, pale as the specter of death.

The morning after, I was back with Ryan, an Australian diver, and his mate, Anthony, from a dive centre in Anakao. The aven of Vintany was explored by the latter two in May

The park newly grants permission to dive Vintany, following an agreement with Le Relais d'Ambola Hotel in Ambola. The site is a mere ten-minute walk from the Mitoho car park, on the top of the Mahafaly Plateau. Visually appealing, the sinkhole is ten metres deep. Ropes and harness are recommended to climb down into it, as well as to lower tanks and gear. Nonetheless, with helmet on for extra safety, I made use of a root of a banyan tree to ease my way down along the cliff side. Once into the pit, I could only marvel at the waterfall of roots, cascading down like a curtain of white stems. Quite a sight, indeed!

White and pink blind fish were skimming the surface. I had a feeling of *déjà vu*, as the floor sediment was



mus, *Hippopotamus lemerlei*, from south-west Madagascar. Identified as such by JR Boisserie, it was one of the three ancient species of Malagasy hippo that have disappeared over a thousand years ago.

I brought the hippo femur I discovered to a research lab at the Museum of Natural History in Paris and was fortunate enough to meet Dr Antoine Zazzo and his colleague Olivier Tombret, who agreed to do carbon-dating analysis of the bone. It was found to be approximately 1,394 years old, dating back to the 7th century, between 595 AD and 677 AD.



### Vintany sinkhole

A few days later, I returned to Tsimanampetsotse National Park in search of new avens, or cenotes. On the Andranalamalaika circuit, Malagasy guide Nicolas took me to the collapsed sinkhole of Andrianamaniloky. There, at the bottom of a treacherous slope of slippery boulders, a pool of clear water hid in the darkness. A number of pink and white



CNRS scientist Olivier Tombret with hippo femur in lab at the Museum of National History in Paris. Carbon-dating found the bone to be around 1,394 years old (circa 595-677AD)



September 21 & 22, 2013  
(Saturday & Sunday)  
PhoenixDiveShow.com



October 5 & 6, 2013  
(Saturday & Sunday)  
StLouisDiveShow.com



October 11 & 12, 2013  
(Friday & Saturday)  
CarolinaDiveShow.com



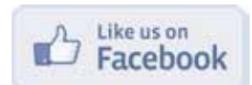
January 25 & 26, 2014  
(Saturday & Sunday)  
BaltimoreDiveShow.com

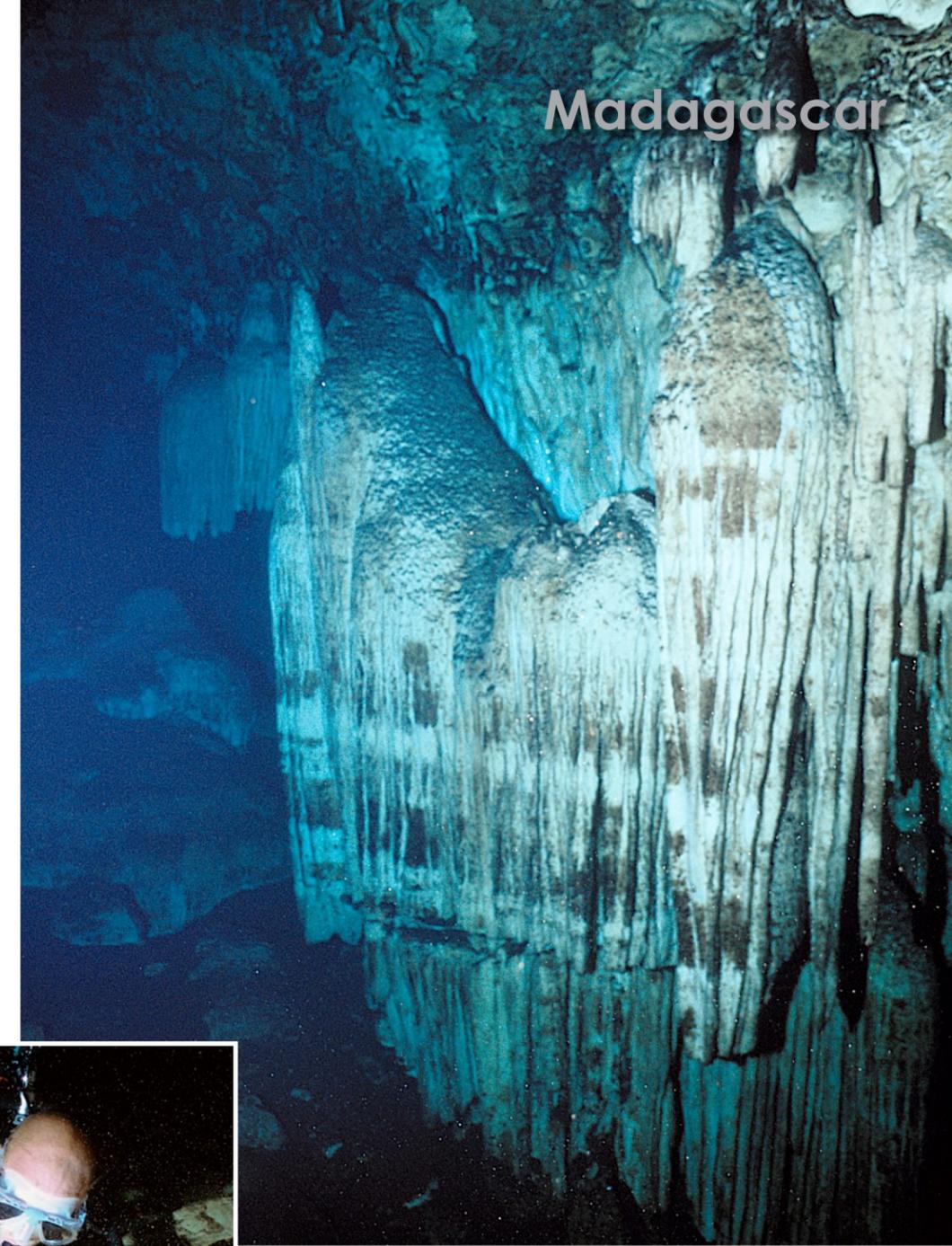


February 22 & 23, 2014  
(Saturday & Sunday)  
TexasDiveShow.com



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THIS PAGE: Vintany sinkhole. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Cluster of stalactites; Diver facing a stalagmite; Formations against the wall; Diver inspects crocodile skull; Complete skeleton of a dwarf horned crocodile with jaws

with all its teeth. A thrill ran up my spine at the thought that 1,000 years ago, or even 10,000 years ago, the site was a crocodile haven. By all means, there would have been fish as well, otherwise how could the monsters have survived?

Further down the slope, small lemur skulls lay here and there, once prey of the reptiles. The most visually striking piece was an almost complete skeleton of a crocodile with dorsal spine intact. The vertebra rings were just massive.

Majestically, the wonders of the cave revealed themselves at depth, as the cavern descended in various balconies. Clusters of stalactites came down from the

roof of the cave, with truncated stalagmites underneath—evidence that the aven was once a dry cave for at least 20,000 years, judging by the fact that some stalagmites were two metres tall, not to mention the amount of bat guano present. Other broken stalagmites attested to the occurrence of ancient earthquakes. It was, I thought, “Elementary, my dear Watson!”

At a depth of 28 metres, shawls of calcite gracefully decorated the walls at a height of two to three meters. The gin clear visibility was a definite plus in appreciating these geological wonders, preserved in their timeless shroud.

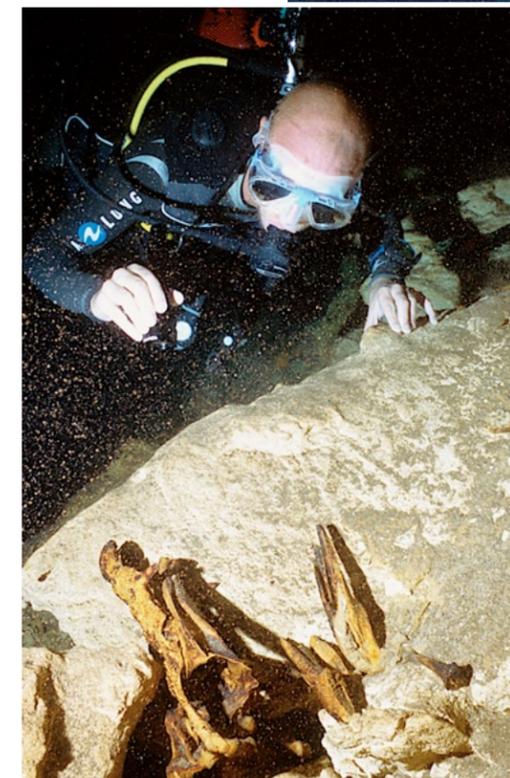
The progressive return to the surface was a vision of

again bat guano, easily stirred up. Anthony led me underwater, above a field of rocks and boulders resulting from the collapse of the roof.

For a while, he seemed to be searching for something. Then suddenly, he pointed towards a collection of bones. In a stupor, I

stared at the skull and jaws of a crocodile, a brownish golden colour, with an easily recognizable tooth. Dreadful. The specimen was probably 1.5 metres long.

A short distance away, I discovered another jaw of a younger specimen,



fairlyland. The wide angle panorama of the curtain of roots, outlined against the backlight, was superb. One came out of the water with a sensation of bliss. Vintany was the magical aven—a

dive of 55 minutes, at a bath temperature of 29°C. Unbelievable, but true!

Upon exiting the sinkhole, I noticed a family of ring-tailed lemurs, or “makis”, frolicking joyfully in the foliage of the banyan tree. Curious of the day visitors, they fed actively on the capsules of the giant ficus. The lemurs gave me roguish glances and hopped swiftly from branch to branch, as if everything was going for the better in the best of worlds. I thought to myself, “By Jove!





Guide and expedition member, Christina, sitting near the green pool at the bottom of Andramanoatse sinkhole (left) and carrying dive gear on return walk from Andramanoatse (above); Skull of a lemur, killed by a croc, Vintany (below); Skull and jaws of a crocodile, Vintany (bottom left)



Makis lemurs attracted to the waterhole, Andramanoatse

When the crocs are gone, the makis dance." After my discovery of the femur of a dwarf hippopotamus at Binabe Cave in November 2012, I was keen to return to the area again and explore some more.

### Andramanoatse

One sunny morning, on my way to Itampolo in our driver José's 4x4, we stopped at various villages in the heart of the bush, as I was trying to locate a new sinkhole far inland. The driver was helpful in translating my questions to a local man, who seemed

to have a clue to what I was talking about. "Yes, yes, big hole... clear water, good to drink, no cattle access," he said. That sounded good. Although it was a bit far and he didn't know how long we'd have to

walk on top of the Mahafaly Plateau, he was willing to guide me and help carry the scuba tank, for a reasonable fee. We made an appointment two days later, early in the morning, because I guess the sun would be a killer. I



found him, as promised, sitting under a tree, in the center of the village of Kuristy, a cluster of wooden huts that looked like a shanty town. We were off to Andramanoatse. The guide stoi-

cally carried the 15-litre steel tank attached to the BCD on his back. Christina followed with the fins and some water, and I took the rest of the dive equipment in a yellow mesh bag, in addition to a knapsack with the camera. Fifteen minutes later, we climbed up to the Mahafaly Plateau. The somewhat clear trail divided into other trails across forests of *Alluaudia*, and *Didieracea*—octopus trees with the weirdest shapes. Isolated bottle baobabs dotted the landscape like giants. Blue couas—endemic birds with long tails—hopped across the trail once in a while, adding a touch of life to this apparent no man's land. One hour had elapsed when we started descending into a valley, stepping over slabs of hard white limestone. Suddenly, the guide turned around stretching his arms with a smile—we were here.

The collapsed sinkhole was about 100 metres in diameter. Facing east, the cliff was 50m high and imposing. Climbing down the slope of rubble and boulders among trees and shrubs, we came to a small lake covered by a film of green algae at the base of the massive wall broken by some slanting fractures. The place looked definitively prehistoric. Big banyan-like avia trees with extensive roots bordered the sinkhole inside the pit. The number of dungs and other droppings scattered around left no doubt that cattle and goats came to drink here, not only humans! After I threw a stone into the pool, I noticed clear water below the film, and that was encouraging, at least. Venturing around the sides and on the top of the aven for photographic angles, I spotted some maki lemurs and black vasa par-



rots in the area.

After getting ready for the dive, I entered the water cautiously. The first hole on the left plunged deep under the rocky overhang. The silt on the slope was very thick, fine and easily stirred up, troubling visibility immediately. I secured a tie-off to the roof of the cave, and I reeled my way in, down to 20 metres, soon to find myself in a silt storm.

"It doesn't make sense to continue into this madness alone," I thought to myself. The passage was too narrow. I turned around and tried the second hole to the left, as I exited. Funnel-like in shape, it was the same story in the second hole, and I gave up after a while.

At the third hole, I understood that I would have no luck there either, silting out the same as the last two. But just as I made my way back to the surface through a cloud of pastel green yellowish silt, I came to what looked like dead branches sticking

eerily out of the mud.

Not that I had ever come across that sort of curiosity before, but I recognized at once the forking truncated end of the jaw with four tooth holes in the middle and the two prominent outer holes of the tusks, with one still in place, albeit broken—it was the lower jaw of a dwarf hippopotamus. There was also a femur blackened with age.

Although the water temperature was a comfortable 27°C, after 22 minutes diving at 21m, I started shivering in my Lycra suit.



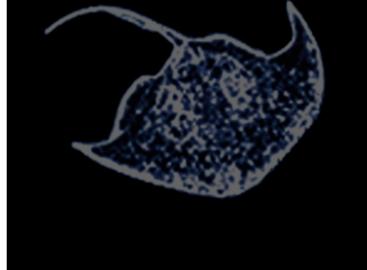
A few local people suddenly materialized out of thin air, coming down into the sinkhole to collect some water for their journey onward. They looked at us with inquisitive glances, and I decided to move on swiftly.

"I shall be back for some more explorations elsewhere next time!" I told the guide, as we shook hands heartily. We left in a cloud of dust, bound for Ambola where we would spend the night. On the way home, I was already planning another exploratory dive at the isolated Andrianamaniloka (sinkhole) cave in Tsimanampetsotse National Park. ■

*Pierre Constant is an author, photographer, dive master, naturalist consultant and expedition organizer based in the Galapagos Islands. Constant will organise a trip to southern Madagascar in May and September next year. For more information, visit: [Calaolife.com](http://Calaolife.com) and [Scubadragongalapagos.com](http://Scubadragongalapagos.com)*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Black vasa parrot on an octopus tree (*Alluaudia*); Red dirt road to Tsimanampetsotse National Park; Freshwater spring on the seashore at Kuritsky; Baobab trees, Tsimanampetsotse National Park

# fact file



## Madagascar



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, NORTH-SULAWESI.ORG, D. SILCOCK

**History** Madagascar was an independent kingdom until it was colonized by the French in 1896. It regained its independence, however, in 1960. Free presidential and National Assembly elections were held during 1992-93, ending 17 years of rule by a single party. Didier Ratsiraka, who led the country in the 70's and 80's, was voted back into office in 1997. Half the country came close to secession in a row over the 2001 presidential election which was contested by followers of Didier Ratsiraka and Marc Ravalomanana. Ravalomanana was finally announced the winner by the High Constitutional Court in April 2002. Ravalomanana went on to win a second term in a landslide victory in 2006, however, he ended up handing over power to the military in early 2009, following protests over broaden-

ing restrictions on the press of the opposition and activities. The military then placed the mayor of Antananarivo, Andry Rajoelina, in office on in what many consider a coup d'etat. Political gridlock ensued, which has challenged regional and international organizations attempting to resolve the issue by forming a government in which power is shared. Independent presidential elections pushed forward by the electoral commission and the United Nations were delayed until late July 2013, due to logistical problems. Government: Republic. Capital: Antananarivo

**Geography** Madagascar, which is the world's fourth-largest island, is located in the Indian Ocean, east of Mozambique, in Southern Africa; It holds a strategic position along the Mozambique Channel. The island's terrain includes a narrow coastal plain as well as mountains and a high plateau in the island's interior. Coastline: 4,828km. Lowest point: Indian Ocean 0m. Highest point: Maromokotro 2,876m

**Climate** Along the coast, it is tropi-

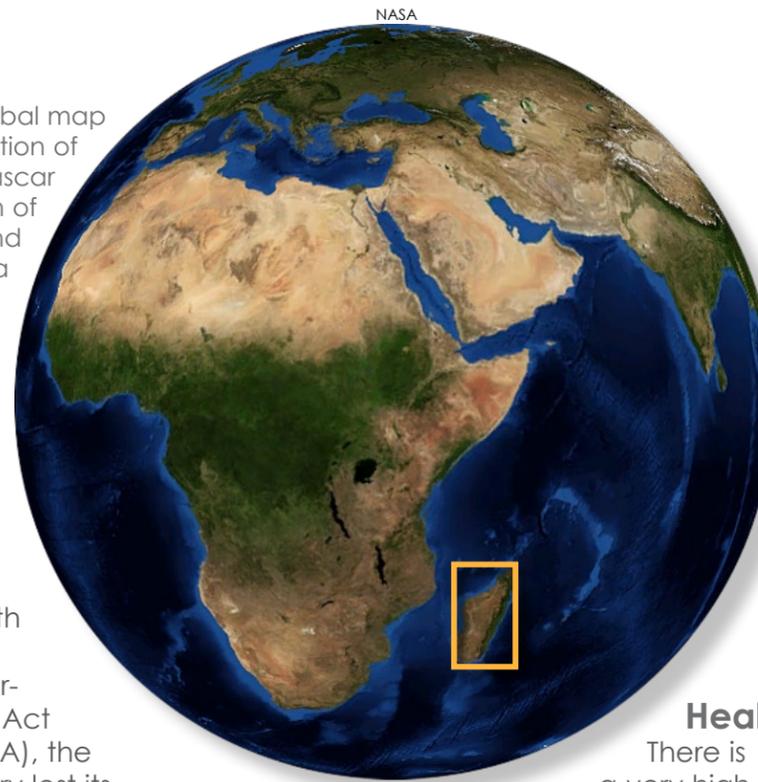
cal, with temperate climate inland, while the south is arid. Natural hazards include periodic drought, cyclones and locust infestation as well as the potential for volcanism, but volcanoes on Madagascar have not been active during historical times.

### Environmental issues

Deforestation and overgrazing have resulted in soil erosion. Other challenges include desertification, raw sewage contamination of surface water and water pollution from organic wastes. In addition, there are several species of flora and fauna unique to the island that are endangered.

**Economy** In the mid-1990s, the government abandoned socialist economic policies in order to pursue privatization and liberalization policies led by the World Bank and IMF—policies which have since been undermined by the current political crisis. However, the country is on a gradual mend, albeit from an extremely low level. The mainstay of the economy is agriculture (including forestry and fishing) which employs 80% of the population and accounts for more than one-fourth of GDP. A brief boom in apparel exports resulted from duty-free access to the United States, but because Madagascar failed to comply with regulations of the African

RIGHT: Global map with location of Madagascar  
FAR RIGHT: Location of Mahafaly Plateau and Tsimanampetsotsa Nature Reserve (TNR) on map of Madagascar  
LOWER LEFT: Water mantis (water scorpion) in the shallows at Avintany sinkhole



### Health

There is a very high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever; vectorborne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever; water contact disease such as schistosomiasis (Bilharzia); and animal contact disease such as rabies (2013)

### Decompression chamber

There are no hyperbaric chambers on Madagascar, and facilities in nearby Maputo, Mozambique, have limited access. The next nearest modern facilities are located in South Africa in Johannesburg, Durban, East London and Cape Town.

### Travel/Visa/Security

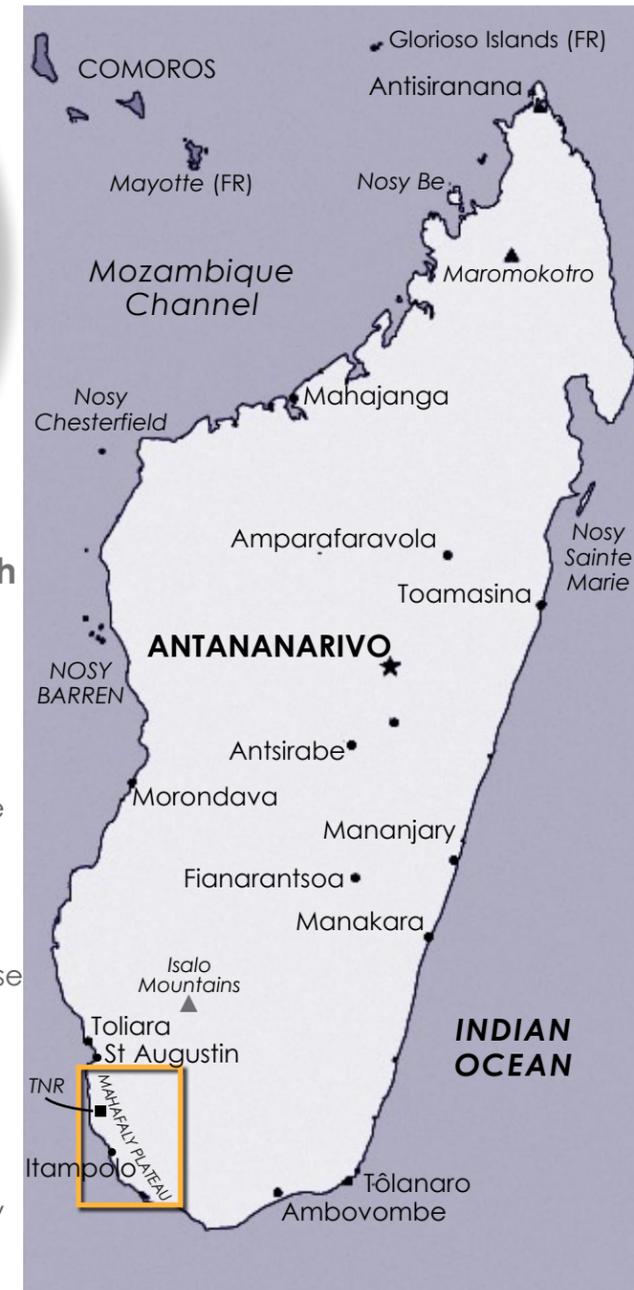
Passport valid for at least six months required. Free 30-day visa available to tourists upon arrival. Proof of yellow fever immunization required for all travellers coming from infected areas within six months prior to arrival in Madagascar. Check with your state

Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the country lost its duty-free access in January 2010. A sharp decline in textile production followed. The economy is further embattled by the current political crisis, which began in early 2009. Tourism dropped by half in 2009 compared with tourism in 2008, causing wariness in investors. There was slow growth from 2010 to 2012, but expansion in agriculture and mining may spur more economic growth in 2013.

**Currency** Malagasy ariary (MGA). Exchange rates:  
1EUR = 2,913.57MGA  
1USD = 2,197.80MGA  
1GBP = 3,458.29MGA  
1AUD = 2,043.53MGA  
1SGD = 1,732.90MGA

**Population** 22,599,098 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: Malayo-Indonesian, Cotiers, French, Indian, Creole, Comoran. Religions: Indigenous beliefs 52%, Christian 41%, Muslim 7%. Internet users: 319,900 (2009)

**Language** French and Malagasy are the official languages. English is also spoken.



department on security warnings, as there have been incidents of unrest in the capital in recent years.

### Websites

Madagascar Tourism Board  
**Madagascar-tourisme.com/en**  
Tsimanampetsotsa Nature Reserve  
**Parcs-madagascar.com**  
OTHER SOURCES:  
TRAVEL.STATE.GOV, DIVETRAVEL.CO.ZA,  
LIQUIDADVENTURES.CO.ZA





*Washington State's*

# San Juan Islands

Text and photos by Barb Roy



White plumose anemones cascade down the Wall at Whale Rocks underwater



Dive buddy Wayne Grant makes his way through the kelp forest (above); Alabaster nudibranch found in northern San Juans (right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Crimson anemones are often seen in the San Juan Islands

**Every now and then I get an assignment close to home, which means my dive buddy and I can usually load up the car with dive and photography gear, and maybe a kayak or two, and head out for a full weekend of adventurous exploring. If the location is exceptional, like an assignment to dive in Washington State's San Juan Islands, we often allocate several days to experience all that's available.**

When researching this unique area, I found there are over 170 different islands and reefs that have been named in the San Juan Archipelago. Of this spectacular array only four islands are serviced by the local ferry system—San Juan, Orcas, Lopez and Shaw—with daily departures from Anacortes. This would be great if we wanted to do some shore diving, since the ferries haul automobiles, but boat diving was on our agenda. To accommodate, we hooked up with a group of divers leaving from Anacortes on the dive charter boat, *Lu Jac's Quest*, run by Phil Jensen.

"Phil is an old sea dog, and I mean that in the best way," said Ron Akesson,



owner of the Bellingham dive store, Adventures Down Under (ADU). "On average, I book around 15 dive charters a year with Phil. He is thoroughly comfortable with being on the water and



## San Juans

life is rich and thick wherever we happen to splash. There's always something to film—be it nudibranchs, lots of anemones, crabs, the occasional harbor seal or sea lion, octopus, or lingcod."

As we approached the lighthouse overlooking the dive site, my imagination ran wild, wondering how many shipwrecks might be hiding below. Or maybe this current affected site would be covered in life, similar to the sites around Victoria, British Columbia in Canada, only a few miles away. The flow of the current had not yet slacked, resembling a river of moving water full of overlapping kelp fronds.

Most divers wanting to venture underwater in this northwestern part of North America have come to

clear summer day in June complete with a few squawking gulls in the distance and two bald eagles flying overhead, as we motored past lounging harbor seals and black cormorants. San Juan Island is the largest of the islands, with the dive site located on the northern side. This gave me plenty of time to interview other divers onboard and see why they like the San Juans so much.

Mike Meager and his dive buddy, Jim Copher, are regular customers of ADU, joining them almost monthly on their excursions into the San Juans. As an avid diver and an underwater videographer, Mike explained:

"I like diving the San Juans for several reasons but mainly because I am susceptible to motion sickness and because it is so beautiful here! The inland waterways of the San Juans are very protected, and the norm is flat calm or close to it. There's rarely any swell. Also, the evergreen trees grow right down to the waterline, and during the summer, you can usually see Mt. Baker in the background, making it very scenic above and below the water.

"Once underwater, the invertebrate



Divers prepare for a dive in the San Juan Islands (above); Sea lions at Whale Rocks (top right); Burrowing sea cucumber can be found at most sites (top left)

Location of San Juan Islands on map of Washington State in northwestern United States

freighters and tankers to avoid our divers.

"He lets me choose where I want to take my groups and works with me to select a proper slack time of when to put the divers in, according to what the currents are doing. Since currents can be pretty tricky around here, the small groups of ten or so work well to keep track of everyone. His 42-foot (12.8-meter) vessel allows plenty of room to deal

with all the gear or move into the cabin if it is raining."

**Lime Kiln Park.** Our first destination was in front of the lighthouse at Lime Kiln Park on San Juan Island. It was a sunny

is very experienced. Phil is very low key, which has a calming effect on everyone around him. This is really nice if we are doing a tech dive out in the shipping lanes of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and he is coordinating with captains of



NASA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A collage of color beneath Deception Pass Bridge (right); Finger sponge cluster at Deception Pass below; Divers prepare for a shore dive at Deception Pass Bridge (lower right)

respect the power of these natural current flows, appreciating the rich nutrients that feed such an abundance of colorful marine life. Therefore, waiting for slack (when the flow of water stops to change direction) is a common practice as part of the dive's enjoyment. An experienced boat captain will know just when to put his divers in and for how long.

While we waited for slack, everyone donned their gear. The boat is set up so divers are positioned on the back deck where they can easily enter and exit the water. Once gear is on, you do a giant stride entry off the back between two ladders (which are pulled up and out of the way). Once in the water, you wait for your buddy to follow.

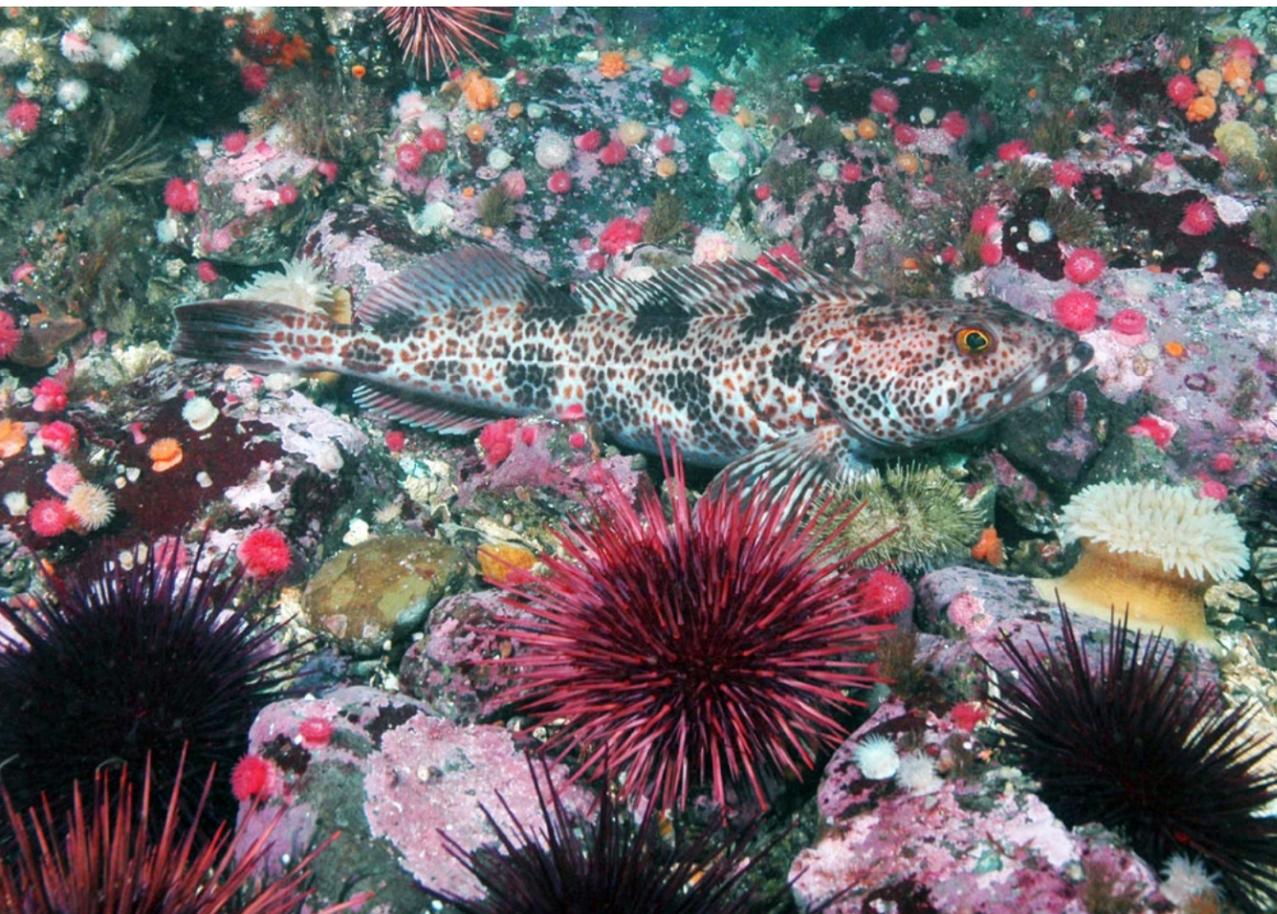
The water was clear and crisp at 48°F (8.8°C) as my dive buddy, Wayne, and I descended below the surface,



## San Juans

making it easy to locate a pair of wolf-eels peeking out from a den of overlapping flat rocks. Before long, two other divers joined us. The wolf-eels appeared very curious of their bubble-blowing audience but didn't venture any farther from their shelter, perhaps because they may have been guarding a cluster of eggs or maybe just wary of the divers in general since this underwater site is rarely visited.

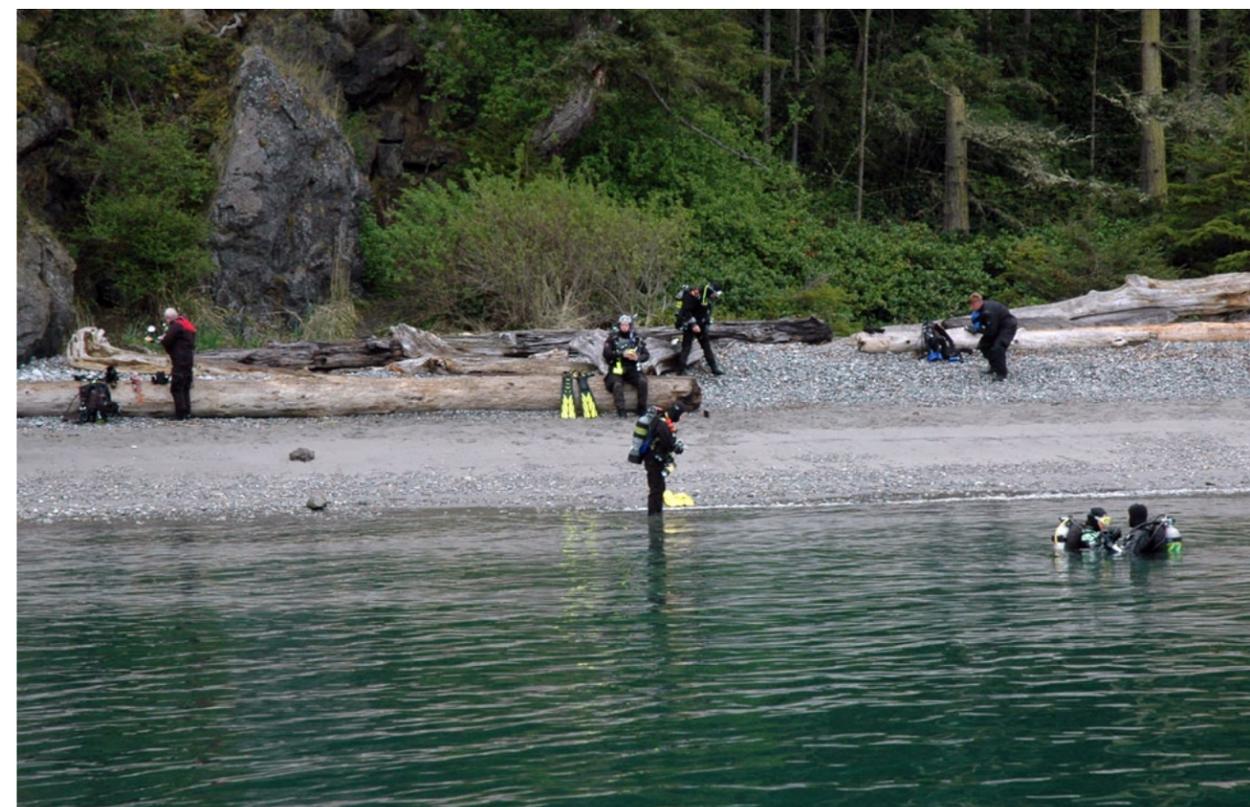
Staying at the same depth, we continued along a beautiful wall of large white plumose anemones that seemed to cascade down like a white waterfall. In the light of the video cameras, their long white columns and cotton-like plumes began to take on a regal appearance. Another section of the rock wall provided a foundation for clusters of yellow sponge, more crimson anemones, sea stars and deep red giant urchins within numerous cracks and jagged fractures. With the exceptional visibility, I could see



following golden brown fronds of kelp down to 40 feet (12 meters) where the terrain was covered in large boulders on a gently sloping decline. A closer look revealed each of the boulders supported a vibrant collection of invertebrate life like small orange tunicates, yellow zoanths and several different species of anemones. We were now within a forest of kelp along with a school of large rockfish that ignored us, as they hovered in mid-water.

Needless to say, I wasted no time with my Aquatica-housed Nikon collecting shots. Wayne had his Go-Pro camera and was already absorbed in watching a morning sunstar heading for the siphon of a buried clam. A pair of bright pink crimson anemones and a delicate white alabaster nudibranch caught my attention.

The kelp forest thinned out as we descending to 60 feet (18 meters),



Lingcod discovered on dive at Deception Pass Bridge



Large male orca from resident pod in the San Juans (left); A morning sunstar next to burried clam siphon (right)

San Juans

Juans he responded:

"Long Island West Wall is my favorite. I just love that wall on the west side and the blanket of strawberry anemones (*corynactis*) that carpet the bottom. For some reason, I love filming the little squishy critters, and you can see some of this beautiful scenery in my *Exploring the San Juans* video. Whenever I get to dive there, I stick to one spot and just concentrate on the anemones. The wall is full of other beautiful anemones also."

A collection of Mike's underwater videos can be found on his YouTube page: [www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver](http://www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver).

"I count nine specific San Juans videos," adds Mike. "I do have several specific videos on the San Juans posted on my YouTube channel. Just scroll down and



Wayne about 50 feet away.

As our dive time grew to an end, we slowly began our ascent back up the wall. Hidden within a mass of giant acorn barnacles was a cute tiny male scalyhead sculpin (fish) in an empty barnacle shell. Only its tiny head stuck out, possibly guarding a nest of eggs as well.

We ended our dive with a long safety stop back in the thicker part of the kelp forest next to shore. After getting situated with our buoyancy, we looked around at all of the hovering black rockfish, feeling like one of the crowd.

Before long, I could feel the tug of the current beginning to grow in strength. And as we waited at the surface for the boat to pick us up, a couple paddlers in kayaks paused to ask about our dive, curious of the critters we encountered. As usual, it was fun to watch their surprised expressions when we told them of the colorful variety residing just below their boats.

### Whale watching

Time between dives can be equally as fun on a San Juan dive charter, especially if you have ever paid to be on a whale-watching boat, knowing how crowded they can be. Not so on Lu Jac's Quest during the months when the southern resident orca pod is cruising about the islands; divers are often treated to quite a show of activity.

In the past, Wayne and I have enjoyed photographing orcas passing so close Phil has had to turn off the engines. But orcas are not the only topside wildlife commonly seen; the occasional group of dolphins or pod of porpoises might also pass by. I don't think there has ever been a time on any of the trips when we have not seen huge

sea lions or harbor seals out on the exposed reefs enjoying some dry time.

"One of the best minke whale encounters was with Ron Akeson's group off Ice Berg Point," said Phil. "We watched a whale jump completely out of the water five or six times! 2013 is our tenth year of taking divers out, and you never know what you will see out here."

**Long Island.** When asked where Mike's favorite dive was in the San



It's not unusual to see a pair of wolf-eels in the San Juans (above) or moon snails (left)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver Ron Akeson adjusts video camera before descending; Male scalyhead sculpin likely guarding eggs in empty barnacle shell; Divers Nolan and David Grose enjoy diving the islands whenever they can

bridge is equally as full of life as Browning Wall.”

**Deception Pass.** This is another favorite dive destination Wayne and I like to visit, where we are able to dive beneath the huge Deception Pass Bridge. The 1,487-foot (453-meter) steel structure was completed in 1935, connecting Fidalgo Island to Whidbey Island. Today, over two million vehicles cross the bridge annually, and the bridge was declared a Natural Historic Monument in 1982.

Below extreme currents form impressive whirlpools and cause turbulent water to rush around Pass Island causing downdrafts and standing waves during low tide. For diving the area, good slack currents are limited to only a few days per year, making it a challenge for dive organizers like Ron to predict when the best dive time will be.

“Like any other location, when Phil and I put together a trip to Deception Pass, we give a thorough dive briefing and

only allow experienced divers to participate,” said Ron from ADU. “All the trouble we seem to go through to plan and organize the trip tends to pay off when we see what’s down there. The life is incredible!”

Incredible may not be the correct word to describe the dive—it’s more like spectacular!

I entered the cool clear water first, holding onto a strand of bull kelp in a protected part of the Pass, as I waited for Wayne to enter the water. Looking down, I thought I was in a huge tank at the Vancouver Aquarium. Multitudes of varying size fish freely swam about the kelp. Thirty feet below, swaths of lavender and pink covered much of the rocky terrain. Green and red sea urchins added texture while orange, purple and tan ochre sea stars seem to pile together on smooth rock faces.

Once Wayne was in, we followed Ron and the other divers underwater to the main part of the wall on the south side of Pass Island. Our time was limited to only 40 minutes, so everyone quickly moved to their favorite depths. The plan was to swim down the wall then turn around and head back, usually at a different depth because of the



look at the playlist for Washington State dives. Scroll that list to watch videos on: *Kellets Bluff*, *Exploring the San Juans*, *Strawberry Island*, *Invertebrates*, *Whale Rock* and *Deception Pass*. Also, *Colors of Cold* is a good sampling with some San Juan shots, as well as *Salish Sea Life on the Rocks* has lots of shots from the San Juans.”

“I don’t have just one favorite dive site in the San Juans,” said Ron Akeson. “But if I could only do one dive in Washington State, it would be Deception Pass. It reminds me so much of the Port Hardy area on Northern Vancouver Island, probably because the site we dive under the



Harbor seals are a common sight in the San Juan Islands



Divers emerge after a dive at Lime Kiln on San Juan Island

diverse variety of critters.

I was so enchanted with the colors; even the lingcod we came across were dappled in blue and orange spots. Heart crabs, painted anemones, orange burrowing sea cucumbers, pink brooding anemones, hydroids and giant barnacles were everywhere. Between the barnacles, tan finger-like sponge and assorted groups of feather-duster worms took up the remaining space.

Ron was busy shooting video of the wall when we came across him. Later he explained, "I am currently working on a film of under-

water life in Washington State, which will be followed by one portraying British Columbia diving. Third on the agenda is a film on diving high current sites of the northwest, not when the current is running, which commonly reach up to seven knots (8 mph)."

### Afterthoughts

Overall, the diving we enjoyed throughout our San Juan adventure was delightful and so different at each location. At Whale Rocks, we had sea lions join us, as we checked out an excellent wall full of invertebrate life. Three wolf-

eels and seven different species of rockfish were counted at Bell Island.

Topside activities for us included a drive and hike at the top of Mount Constitution in Moran State Park on Orcas Island for a beautiful panoramic view of the islands and Mount Baker of the Cascade Range. It was also on Orcas Island where we met up with Tim Ferguson and his dive buddy, as they prepared for a shore dive.

"I like snorkeling here from my dive kayak so thought the diving might be good as well. We had to bring everything and no airfills are available. Boat diving is also a favorite too, but we felt like trying something different. We both like hiking, so when we're not diving, we have three great hikes to try: Mount Constitution, Turtleback Mountain and Obstruction Pass."

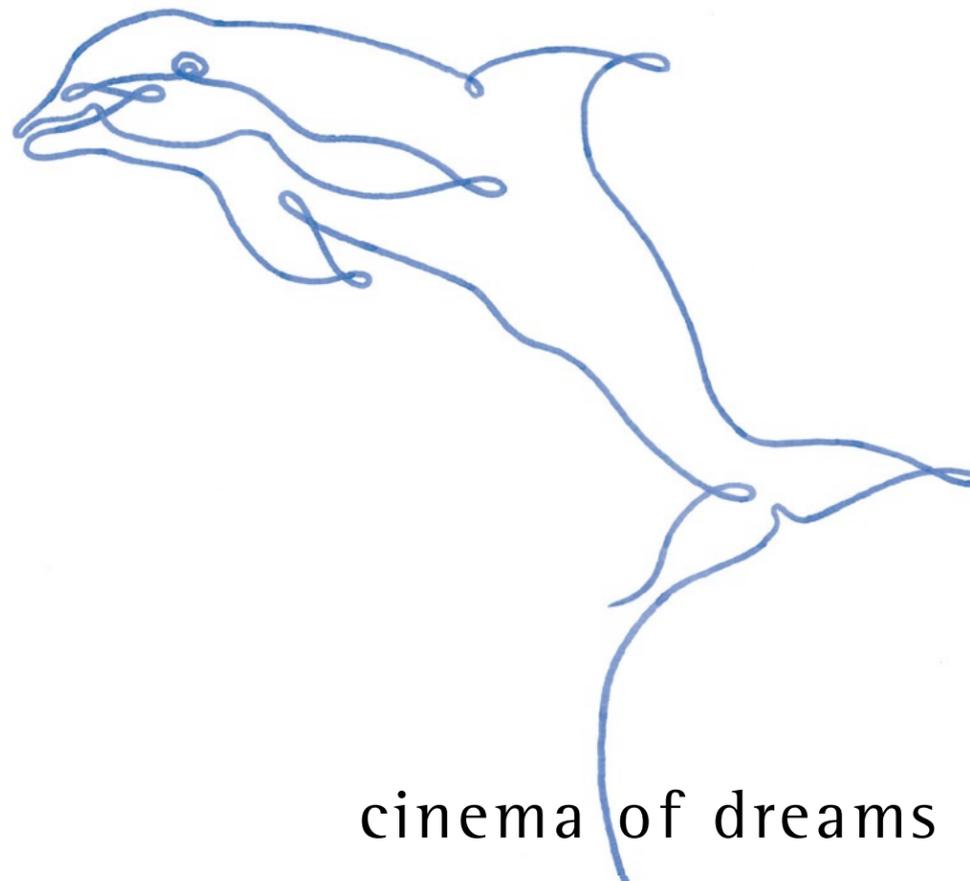
For those wishing to visit the San Juan Islands, they are located about 65 miles (105km) north of Seattle. They are conveniently in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, yielding summer temperatures of around 70°F (21°C) and winter temperatures in the low 40's.

Group dive charters can be organized directly through Phil Jensen (Lujacsquest.com) or through Adventures Down Under in Bellingham (Adventuresdownunder.com). Expected pricing in 2014 will be US\$115 for two boat dives, which includes lunch—no dive gear included. Full rental (hire) packages are available on ADU charters for \$65 (wetsuit) or \$90 for a drysuit package (must already be trained in drysuit use).

Whether you are an underwater photographer, videographer, technical or recreational diver, the San Juans in Washington State offers a cornucopia of dive opportunities. ■



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