

Underwater World



Maximize your cruises by learning to dive.

Story and photography by Charles (Chuck) Shipley



Preparing for a Bahamian dive from Tusen Takk II, the author's well-traveled Kadey-Krogen 48 North Sea.

My wife

Barbara and I were divers before we became trawler owners. We learned to dive after listening to friends talk about their fascination with the underwater world. In the beginning, I was reluctant—I had previously discovered on my first attempt at snorkeling that I was afraid to breath through a snorkel when my face was submerged. I had subsequently overcome that fear by conditioning myself in waist-deep water, but I still found the prospect of strapping on all of the equipment for scuba diving to be daunting. But my wife was eager to learn, so I joined her in lessons designed to lead to a diving certification—the only way to safely learn. The lessons were graduated, so although each step was scary, I soon found that the skills of the previous lesson no longer caused trepidation. By the time we bought our first trawler, we had become PADI-certified underwater divers, followed by advanced divers, and then NITROX-certified divers.

It took us a while to realize what a happy combination our two interests would make. Initially, we probably took for granted the benefits of the symbiosis, but after nearly a decade of cruising in the Caribbean, we have a keener appreciation of each interest and of their mutual enhancement.

We have noticed that almost all cruisers either scuba dive or snorkel. To be sure, each provides an opportunity to experience the incredible sights and sensations of the sea, but we feel that scuba has some clear advantages. Scuba diving allows you to get much closer to the bounty of colorful underwater creatures so you can see them in greater detail and for longer periods of time. If that isn't enough, scuba diving, once certified, takes much less effort.

Trawlers provide a particularly appealing platform from which to dive. Want to visit a distant island that is downwind and would therefore present a problem on the return trip if you were sailing? Go anyway. A trawler doesn't mind having wind on the nose, even if the distances require a multi-day trip. And the generous cargo space available on a trawler, as contrasted to many sailing vessels, means that storage of your dive gear is manageable. Furthermore, the swim platform so common to trawlers is often absent on sailboats.

Indeed, at some locations one can do a giant stride right off the swim platform and immediately be in a rewarding underwater environment. At other locations, the anchoring or mooring site for the trawler may be a bit removed from the dive site, but with an appropriately sized and powered tender, made possible by the extra space and carrying capacity of a trawler, one can easily reach even remotedive sites. The flexibility of this latter alternative is compelling, especially if the dinghy is large enough to comfortably accommodate (a minimum of) two passengers, the dive gear, and any camera equipment.

DIVING PARADISE

As I write this, our Kadey-Krogen 48 North Sea, *Tusen Takk II*, is floating off Kralendijk, Bonaire, in a mooring field that is provided for visiting vessels. The entire island is surrounded (to a depth of 200 feet) by a Marine Park that forbids anchoring. Sometimes, we are able to dive right off our boat, but often we take our 12-foot RIB to one of the 80 marked dive buoys in the



Bonaire Marine Park. We have taken our RIB as far north as the Karpata dive site, almost 6 nautical miles from our mooring, and as far south as the *Hilma Hooker* wreck, about four miles distant. To the west, we've visited the far end of Klein Bonaire, also by dinghy, but we usually visit sites closer to home in order to minimize our travel times.

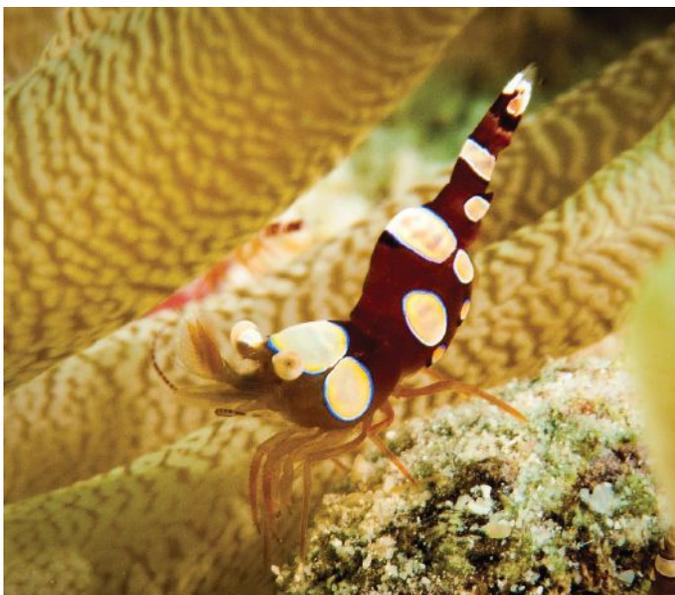
A typical dive in Bonaire begins with a sandy shoulder that is usually a gradual slope from 0 to 30 feet, and then falls more steeply through hard and soft coral to about 120 feet where the bottom returns to sand sand, and for a distance, less steep. We fall over the 30-foot edge and briefly visit depths approaching 100 feet before ascending and cruising into the current (almost always faint) at about 60 feet until our air supply and nitrogen buildup tells us to turn around. We return usually at depths around 30 feet, and when we arrive at our starting point, we linger on the bottom for at least five minutes at 15 feet before ascending to the surface. This is a safety stop designed to slowly vent excess nitrogen from our blood stream and body tissues; What is nice about diving in Bonaire is that we still have plenty to see 15 feet below the surface.

What do we see in the clear and warm waters of Bonaire? Beautiful hard and soft corals, totalling more than 57 species; fascinating sea creatures, large and small. Over 500 species make Bonaire their home. Some of the smallest creatures are also the most beautiful.

EXPLORE THE HOBBY

Learning the names and behaviors of underwater inhabitants has vastly increased our enjoyment of diving. Knowledge enriches the experiences and lifts them from dumb awe at "pretty sights" to informed appreciation. Knowledge enables the excitement of recognizing a rare specimen or understanding the significance of an unusual behavior. Barbara and I have gotten certifications

Opening page: *A Tessellated Blenny appearing from coral.* **Opposite Page:** (top to bottom) *Male Yellowhead Jawfish incubating eggs in his mouth; Baby smooth Trunkfish. Below: Squat Anenome Shrimp.*



in fish identification; certification that qualifies us to conduct surveys for submission to the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF). The mission of REEF is to conserve marine ecosystems by educating, enlisting, and enabling divers to become stewards of the oceans and to, in effect, become citizen scientists. Whether or not one becomes a member of REEF, learning about the creatures of the sea indisputably enhances your enjoyment of diving. Barbara typically dives with her survey slate: On a recent survey she identified and counted more than 100 different species.

Underwater photography has also enhanced my enjoyment of diving. I have specialized in photographing small creatures, because I enjoy capturing images that reveal colorful and intricate details in images that are larger than life. Consequently, I almost always dive with my housed Nikon DSLR, a piece of equipment that keeps me too preoccupied to permit surveying. I dawdle as I photograph. Barb dawdles as she surveys. The combination works well and neither of us gets bored while waiting for the other.

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS

There is now a bewildering number of options for underwater photography. But whether one chooses the diminutive GoPro, a bulky, housed DSLR, or one of the many intermediate options, certain rules of thumb concerning equipment and technique apply. For equipment, use artificial light(s). As light travels through water, different spectrums are filtered out at different rates. In light from the sun, red disappears almost entirely at a depth of 15 feet. The only way to get vibrant colors in an underwater photograph is to provide an alternative light source that is closer to the camera and subject. The alternative light source(s) should be moved out to the side of the camera away from the lens as far as possible in order to minimize the amount of light reflected back to the lens from small particles in the water.

If you are considering housing a point-and-shoot camera, pick one that has a minimal delay between when the shutter button is pushed and when the picture is actually taken, lest you return with nothing but pictures of fish tails.

For improved technique, get close to the subject to minimize the amount of water between the camera and subject. The water will be clearer and the lighting will be brighter and the image will be bigger with significantly more detail. Avoid shooting down on a fish; with the possible exception of flounders, the best fish portraits are taken from the side and usually the background will be less cluttered. Take your time as you move through the water. The slower you go, the more you will see, and the less skittish the fish will be.

Finally, wielding a camera is not a license to abandon buoyancy control. Be aware not to make contact in any way with live coral, because each of these actions is fatal to fragile coral polyps.

HOT SPOTS

For a number of reasons, Bonaire is one of the best places to dive in the tropics, or for that matter, in the world. It has an abundant and varied fish population that has recently received recognition as the most diverse in the Caribbean. It has a remarkable number of named dive sites. Its waters are warm and clear, with temperatures ranging between 78° and 84°, with 100 feet of visibility being the norm. It

SIX ESSENTIAL DIVE GEAR ITEMS

The most important item to possess for diving is one's very own certification card. It can be earned from a variety of agencies, the most popular of which is probably PADI. Only by earning such a card can one be assured of adequately learning about the proper equipment and techniques to dive safely. Lessons typically consist of a combination of book-learning and in-water supervised training that collectively takes several days. Don't go diving without it.

STANDARD EQUIPMENT REQUIRED FOR DIVING CONSISTS OF:

Regulator used to deliver air from the tank to the diver

Gauges for monitoring depth and air supply

Weights used to achieve neutral buoyancy while submerged

BCD (buoyancy control device) used to maintain neutral buoyancy at different depths by making small adjustments to the amount of air in the device

Mask, fins, snorkel

Thermal protection to minimize body heat loss to the highly conductive water

Most divers now own a dive computer, used to calculate the amount of nitrogen that has built up during the dive, an important consideration for avoiding nitrogen narcosis, known informally as "the bends." Many cruisers also own their own air tanks. Some even own their own dive compressor, an option particularly possible for trawlers as opposed to sailboats, due to the extra cargo space aboard.

As a side bonus, trawler owners will also find dive gear useful for non-recreational tasks as cleaning the bottom or clearing snagged lines away from propellers and/or stabilizers.

has a thriving infrastructure to support divers and diving, with well-maintained moorings and a plethora of dive shops where all manner of equipment and supplies can be obtained.

It has a long and storied tradition of diving freedom, where the rules are few but strictly enforced. By diving freedom, I mean that, unlike many other tropical islands, neither conditions nor regulations require one to engage a professional dive boat or to be accompanied by a professional divemaster. Strictly enforced rules include prohibitions against anchoring, wearing gloves, spearfishing, chemical light sticks, or removal of sea shells, lobsters, and so on.

There are, of course, other tropical islands where divemasters are not required and where the diving is good enough to be enjoyable. We have enjoyed diving freedom in the Bahamas, in the Spanish, American, and British Virgin Islands, as well as in many of the French Caribbean islands, including Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Former British islands tend to be more restrictive, requiring that one engage a local dive boat and/or a divemaster. Restrictions notwithstanding, we have had pleasant accompanied dives along the coast between the Pitons in St. Lucia, and good-but-not-great dives in Grenada, where the waters tend to be murkier due to the silt flowing northward from Venezuela's Orinoco River.



Above: Sailfin Blenny; **Below:** An underwater portrait of the author at work.

In addition to Bonaire, two other Dutch islands offer great diving. Saba is spectacular and a charming island to visit for non-divers as well. We have had interesting dives in St. Maarten, as well. But in both places it was necessary to use the services of a dive operation.

Whether you dive in Bonaire, some other Caribbean island, or some other sea for that matter, point your vessel to clear waters and experience the advantages of the freedom of diving from a trawler. Get certified. You won't regret it. ■

Chuck was a Professor of Computer Science until his retirement in July 2005, when he and his wife Barbara sold everything and moved aboard their Kadey-Krogen 48 North Sea trawler Tusen Takk II. They have been cruising the Caribbean since January 2007, travelling as far north as Puerto Rico, as far south as the Macareo River in Venezuela's Orinoco Delta, and as far west as Curacao. An avid amateur photographer, Chuck has had fish, bird, and travel articles and pictures published in several boating magazines. Find their cruising blog at: www.tusentakk2.com/wordpress

