

THE **REEF** SEEKER



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HAPPY NEW YEAR

As we bid farewell - some would say “Good riddance” - to 2016, this is usually a time that is marked by a strong impulse to make changes for the coming year whether that’s going on a diet, making lifestyle changes, or whatever. And if some of your New Year’s resolutions are scuba-related, give some thought to taking more classes, doing some trips, or just diving more in the coming year. Any of those will make you better prepared for whatever comes your way underwater in 2017.

HAS IT REALLY BEEN 10 YEARS?

It’s hard for me to believe, but it was 10 years ago that we closed the chapter on one era and opened up another. Because it was that long ago that we closed the physical store on Wilshire and opened

up what I then referred to as “Reef Seekers West” as we became an Internet-based operation focusing mainly on foreign travel as well as still doing repairs. (Check out the pix at the bottom of page 4.) And 10 years later, we’re still going strong.

I jokingly say that as long as you folks think I know what I’m doing, I’m happy to keep this scam going. But in all seriousness, I am truly appreciative of the trust you place in me to continue to take you to the various corners of the world so we can all stick our heads underwater and see what there is to discover.

In the past 10 years, we’ve run close to 50 trips where we’ve seen the pyramids of Egypt and swum with an Oceanic Whitetip in the Red Sea, viewed a total solar eclipse in Australia while we explored the Great Barrier Reef, have gone nose-to-nose with Great White Sharks and Whale Sharks, frolicked with Manatees and Manta Rays (but not at the same time), hung on for dear life at Blue Corner in Palau and enjoyed a serene drift down Rainbow River in Florida, and even trekked out to Easter Island where the giant Moai are as mysterious and impressive as some of the life we found underwater. In short, it’s been a fabulous ten years.

And it’s going to continue. Al-

ready on the books for this year (some trips detailed inside) are Bonaire, Isla Mujeres, Yap (x 2), Isla Guadalupe, and Raja Ampat. And who knows what the coming years will hold for us?

I’m asked every now and then how much longer I plan on doing this. (NOT that you all think I’m getting old . . .) And my answer is simple: As long as you want me to. I love to dive, love taking YOU diving, and can’t think of a better way for all of us to live life. So I’m game if you’re game.

And thanks again for helping me keep all of this going.

SOME GOOD NEWS FROM 2016

We found out in 2016 that some marine species have recovered enough that their status was upgraded, and that’s a good thing as well as proof that conservation measures work. (I always like to point to the recovery of Black Sea Bass and the demise of abalone as two examples of what happens when we’re proactive as opposed to when we’re not.)

Manatees have been reclassified as “threatened”, and populations of 9 of 14 populations of Hump-
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back Whales have increased. On the other side of the coin, there's talk of whether or not Great Whites should be bumped up a category to "endangered". So we're certainly not in the clear.

But it's always encouraging to see that conservation efforts can have a measurable and positive effect. Sometimes the measures may seem severe in the short term, but the long-term benefits hopefully outweigh the sacrifices.



MANATEES IN FLORIDA

Since we mentioned Manatees in the previous story, we should address a question we get asked each year, which is whether or not we'll be running one of our annual trips to Florida to snorkel with these gentle creatures. Sadly, not in 2017, and perhaps not again at all. Allow me to explain.

Starting in 2008, we ran yearly trips where we'd spend two days diving with Manatees in Crystal River (middle of the state on the Gulf side), and also spent time exploring some of the caverns of Florida Cave County in the northern part of the state. But it always seemed the main attraction for the trip were the Manatee encounters.

When we first starting going, there were restrictions in place, but they

weren't too severe. But over the years, snorkeling with the Manatees has become so popular to the point where tourist interest in interacting with the animals is threatening their survival in the wild. In the last few years the number of tourists trying to snorkel with the Crystal River Manatees has tripled, from about 22,000 in 2008 to over 64,000 in 2014.

So what the Fish & Wildlife Service, who manages the area, has done is implement stricter regulations to protect the manatees and has proposed even more stringent regulations which are still under review. Among those is severely limiting the number of people allowed into the Three Sisters Springs area at any given time as well as over the course of a single day, limiting the time an individual can spend in the area, and requiring everyone to be accompanied by a local certified Manatee guide.

And while I don't disagree with the intent of these regulations, just from a standpoint of running a group trip, it makes it extremely tough. It's quite conceivable I could put together a group and discover once we got down there that there was no way for us to get

into the prime Manatee area, or that I could only get some of us in and others would have to forgo the encounter. And obviously, and again strictly from a tour operator standpoint, that's unacceptable. I can't offer a Manatee Encounter trip where we don't get any Manatee encounters.

So for that reason, I've taken that trip off of our regular schedule and I don't envision it going back on. But none of this should discourage you from attempting to do this on your own. I think doing this on an individual basis and co-ordinating through a Crystal River shop, you'll likely have a good chance at success. But on a group basis, especially when we travel across the country to do it, it just doesn't seem to make sense any more.

Which is all really a shame because it's really neat and special. And what better way to motivate people to help protect unique animals like the Manatees than to give them an up-close experience? And it's certainly a delicate balance between preserving public access and protecting the animal the public trying to get access to. I don't envy FWS the position they're in.

2017 DIVING VACATIONS

March 18-25 • Bonaire

June 10-17 • Isla Mujeres

July 7-19 • Yap Immersion #1

July 21 - Aug 2 • Yap #2



AVALON UNDERWATER CLEANUP

Save the date: Saturday, February 25. That's the date of the 36th Annual Avalon Underwater Cleanup. As always, Reef Seekers will be taking a small but dedicated group of divers over to participate. We generally take an early (6:15AM-ish) boat out of Long Beach, get settled in to the Green Pier and then go have breakfast, do the dive from 9:30-11:00AM, take break for lunch, and then you can either continue diving in the UW Park or you can attend the Awards Ceremony where you may also have a shot at the coveted "Ken Kurtis BS Award." Plus we'll have the annual Miniature Golf Championship once everything is over.

If you want to sign up to go over with us (ferry, taxi, event, and fun) just give us a call at 310/652-4990. Proceeds from the event go to the Catalina Conservation Divers and the Catalina Hyperbaric Chamber.

WHO WANTS TO GO TO BONAIRE?

We've got a few people signed up already but we're planning on being in Bonaire March 18-25. (There's also an option to leave on March 17, which makes the travel

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

*Hope to have the 2017 sked
in place
within the next week
(or thereabouts)*

a bit easier.) The plan is to stay as usual at Buddy Dive which means we'll get in 12 boat dives (2/day for 6 days) as well as a bunch of shore dives. Some of the latter will be on Buddy Reef right there at the resort (including the nightly Parade of Fish) as well as some of Bonaire's famed shore diving spots.

Cost for this wonderful trip is \$1950 (double-occupancy in 2-bd apartments - single occupancy bedroom available at additional cost) and that also includes breakfast daily. It looks like the best airfare is on United through Houston but there are some other itineraries available as well.

Bonaire's always been a favorite spot with us but we haven't gone the last two years for a variety of reasons. So we're really looking forward to going back and this is a great time of the year to do it because it's not overly hot there and shouldn't be overly crowded.

To sign up or just to find out more, call us at 310/652-4990.

WHALE SHARKS ANYONE???

Have you ever wanted to swim with the world's largest fish?

We've got the chance for you to do just that, as we're planning on returning to Isla Mujeres (just off of Cancun) June 10-17. This will mark our fifth trip and even if we "only" get half the level of interaction we had this past August, it'll be a phenomenal experience.

We'll be running the same type of sked we've run in the past:

- SATURDAY - Fly to Cancun
- SUNDAY - Dive Cancun Underwater Museum
- MONDAY - Whale Sharks
- TUESDAY - Cenotes
- WEDNESDAY - Whale Sharks
- THURSDAY - Wreck & reef dive
- FRIDAY - Whale Sharks
- SATURDAY - Fly home

One thing I love about this trip (other than the Whale Sharks) is that you're doing something different every day from what you did the day before. The other nice thing is that, except for the cenotes day, because everything is close, there's plenty of downtime each day to relax, go over pictures, or just chill.

The other great thing about this trip is that, because Mexican regulations limit Whale Shark interactions to snorkeling, it's a perfect trip for someone who's not a scuba diver. And because we're land-based, a non-diver is not stuck on a boat during times they can't par-

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icipate. So IMHO it's got a lot going for it.

Because of the size of the boats we use, this trip is limited to a maximum of 10 scuba divers and 14 people overall (including snorkelers). When we did this trip in August, we actually ended up with TWO groups of 14 so did back-to-back weeks. I don't have that much room on my sked this year, so this is definitely only a 1-week opportunity.

I don't have exact pricing yet but in 2016 it was \$2,490 plus airfare (which ran \$700-\$1100 numerous airlines fly to Cancun so if you've got miles, you might be able to get a free ticket). If you need more info or are ready to sign up, just give us a call at 310/652-4990.



GREAT WHITE SHARK LECTURE AT THE AQUARIUM

If you've got this Thursday evening free, come down to Long Beach and the Aquarium of the Pacific and sit in on the lecture I'll be giving called "What Big Teeth You Have: Diving With Great White Sharks." I'll be recounting the ex-

perience of diving with Great Whites at Isla Guadalupe as well as giving some general info on what we know - and don't know - about this top predator.

Admission (which will also give you a little bit of access to the Aquarium) is \$5 for public. It's free for Aquarium members, seniors (age 62+), teachers, and students with valid ID and advanced reservations. The lecture will be held in the Honda Theater just off of the Great Hall (which is where the big Blue Whale is).

If you can't make it in person, you can also watch the lecture live-streamed on the Aquarium's website. Just point your computer to www.aquariumofpacific.org, click on the LECTURES tab and then follow the links.

PICTURE PAGE - 10 years ago . . .

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2017)



Dismantling the compressor shed out back



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Moving the compressor



Right before we turned in the keys



Rental gear lived in Hal's garage for a while



Day #1 as Reef Seekers West(wood)