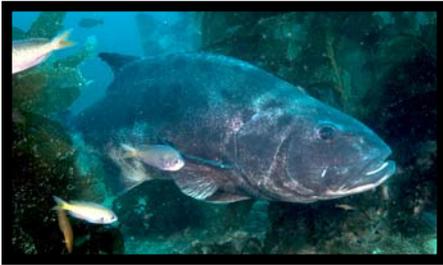


THE REEF SEEKER



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October - 2017



BLACK SEA BASS IN THE PARK!!!

We could not have asked for a better experience at the Avalon Underwater Park last weekend.

All summer long, I've been hearing of reports of Black Sea Bass, and more than one, being spotted hanging around the park. This is not necessarily new, as we've had one or two BSBs in the Park for the last couple of years. But it seems the sightings in the past have been somewhat sporadic, and that the BSBs were only mildly tolerant of divers and would frequently swim away when approached. Not so this year.

It seems like there have been multiple BSBs with the Park boundaries and they seem not only tolerant of divers, but even curious. So it was with great anticipation that we (Glenn Suhd, Anthony Nex, Betsy Suttle, and me - Ken Kurtis) set out from San Pedro on September 23 to see if we could get lucky.

When we set up, things didn't look too promising as it was fairly surgy

on the steps leading down to the water. Not a good sign. But we bravely plunged in and the surge wasn't noticeable at all underwater. Please we also saw how vibrantly the kelp has come back in the Park. (It's almost TOO thick.) On top of that, water temps were hovering around 70° and visibility was running 40-50 feet.

On our first dive (to the right and the area known as The Pinnacles), we only caught a fleeting glance of a BSB outside the edge of the kelp, making a beeline towards the *Sue Jack*. But at least it confirmed that at least one BSB was around. That's a good sign. And we had a great dive. We saw many clumps of Blacksmith trying to get cleaned by various *Senoritas*, there were *Garibaldi* everywhere, and we had a really curious male *Sheephead* who stayed with us for a while and who provided me with one of my all-time favorite *Sheephead* shots as he stared right into the dome port of my housing.

On our second dive, we decided that we'd go left. We almost immediately ran into a good-sized - four feet long or so - BSB just chillin' between the kelp stalks about 30 feet deep. He was willing to give us about 60 seconds of his time and then slowly moved on. We took that as another good sign. And we had another wonderful dive with a *Bat Ray* (spotted on

two occasions), a nice *Scorpionfish*, *juvy Garibaldi*, an orgy of *California Sea Hares* (if you've ever seen them clumped together you know what I mean), and more groups of *Blacksmith* trying to get cleaned.

But best of all was our second BSB encounter on that dive. Right after the *Scorpionfish*, around 70 feet deep, I thought I heard someone singing. And as I turned around to look over my right shoulder, not one, not two, not three, but FOUR BSBs came parading by, in a straight line as if they were playing follow the leader, and they continued in the direction of the *Valiant*. Wow!!!

But our third dive was to be our best and our longest BSB encounter. We decided to explore the middle third of the Park so started by going right to the Pinnacles, and then turned and followed the 60-70 foot contour and that's when we hit pay dirt. Pretty much in the middle of the Park, just hanging amongst the kelp, were all four BSBs.

As soon as I spotted them - so maybe I was 15 feet away - I motioned for everyone else to stop and just settle down so we wouldn't spook them. If you run into BSBs, that's sort of a key thing to do. It's really easy to get excited and think you need to move in before they go away and if

you do that, especially if you're a photog, all you'll get is a good view of a BSB butt.

But when you stop and settle down, it gives them a chance to give you the once-over and decide if you're friend or foe. And that's exactly what they did with us. And after about a minute or so, they actually started moving closer to us as we moved closer to them and all of us could take our time in examining the other.

Based on when I took my first photo and when I took my last photo, the encounter lasted at least 16 minutes. And we had all four of them pretty much the entire time. One or two would cruise in and out but they all stayed in the general area, even when two other divers showed up.

Size-wise, I'd say the smallest one was maybe three feet long and the biggest one around five feet long. I have no idea of the weight but I do know that the largest BSB ever recorded was 564 pounds so I'm guessing the big one was in the 400-pound range. That's a BIG and might impressive fish.

Their presence is also a sign of a healthy (or getting healthy) ecosystem and underscores that the creation of Marine Protected Areas under the Marine Life Protection Act is likely paying off benefits in terms of increased fish counts and general biomass. And that's not only a good thing overall, but also underscores that when we choose to be pro-active in the way we see the ocean environment, we can do things that - while they may seem extreme to some in the short term - in the long run will help make for a healthier ocean and more plentiful fish stocks. And

it creates a situation where everyone - people and animals - wins.

I've posted some of the pictures at the bottom of page 4 of this newsletter and they're also up on my SmugMug page, which you can access through the Reef Seekers website home page which is at www.reefseekers.com. And if you would like your very own BSB experience, you can either head to the Park on your own, or wait until Saturday, October 28, and plan on joining us for our next Avalon adventure. We can't promise that we'll see these leviathans again, but I guarantee you that you won't see them if you stay home.

LOBSTER SEASON HAS OPENED

As of Saturday, September 30, at 6:00AM, it was less safe to be a lobster (unless you resided within a Marine Protected Area). Lobster season is now in full swing through the middle of March. For safety reasons, DF&W delayed the opening this year by 6 hours, moving it from the traditional 12:01AM opening. While we do routinely get a fatality or a close call on that first overnight, just because the

opening was delayed six hours, doesn't mean you can't still be careless if you're not paying attention.

Obviously, the biggest concern is running out of air. We have certainly seen fatalities in the past where the diver paid more attention to the quest than the breathing gas and it cost them their life. No lobster is worth that.

The other thing people sometimes forget is that lobsters are heavy. This means you work harder. This not only means you'll be using up your air faster, but it also means you might be tiring more easily due to the increased workload. So make sure you pace yourself. If you do find yourself in a situation where you're fatigued and still have a long way to go to the boat or shore, it's no sin to drop your weight belt and it's certainly no sin to drop your game bag.

As we advise every year at this time, dive safely and dive smart. Be extra vigilant and remember that if you get skunked, there's always a supermarket on the way home. Just have the guy behind the seafood counter literally toss one to you and then you can legitimately say, "Look what I caught."

2017-18 DIVING VACATIONS

November 2-12 • Fiji

March 24-31 • Bonaire

June 8-20 • Yap Immersion

July 14-28 • Sulawesi, Indo



RETURN TO YAP IN 2018

We had such a good time in Yap this year with our Yap Immersion program, that we'd like to do it again in 2018, this time in June, specifically June 8-20. This will again be a 10-day trip and will include all the things that made our Yap Immersion trips this year so successful: eight full days of diving (roughly 25 dives total), the Manta ID class, Mandarinfish dive, Shark feed dive, plenty of Manta dives, photo workshop, ½ day land tour and history of Yap (including a visit to two Stone Money banks), breakfast daily, crew tip, and more.

I haven't worked out the specific pricing yet but would expect it to be close to what we offered this for this year. I also did a preliminary check of airfares and they are running (on United) about what they were this year, which was a little over \$2,000. So a safe number to use, when you figure the trip, the airfare, and incidentals, would be around \$5,500/person.

As many of you know, I adore going to Yap but what makes this trip so special is that we stay for 10 days instead of the usual 7. That not only means you get a bit more bang for your airfare buck (and there's always the option of adding on another close-by destination if you want to extend your trip) but you really get a chance to

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

Sat., Oct. 7 - Vets Park - Beach Dive - \$25

Thu., Oct. 12 - Vets Park - Night dive - FREE!!!

Wed., Oct. 18 - Photo Workshop - \$25

Sat., Oct. 28 - Avalon UW Park - \$150

“immerse” yourself in Yap and experience all that Yap has to offer, both above and below the water. On our trips this year, we had incredible experiences with both of our groups, some great dives, and memorable animal encounters.

If you're interested or just want to find out more, give us a call at 310/652-4990 or e-mail us. We promise that this is a trip you'll remember for the rest of your life.

PERFECT BUOYANCY

For those who read that headline and went, “Yeah, I wish I had perfect buoyancy,” there is hope. It's not as difficult as it may seem but it's definitely among the more essential diving skills to master as it has numerous benefits.

During the BSB dive on page one, when those other two divers approached us, one reason I noticed them is because one of the divers had very bad buoyancy and was using her hands a lot. In fact, at first it looked like she was swimming with her hands, and as she made her way towards the BSBs, they started to spook.

Use of hands is a big indicator that your buoyancy is not what it should be and, more specifically, that you are too negative which usually

means - especially at depth - that you don't have enough air in your BC. You use your hands because you essentially are “pushing” yourself up and off the bottom as your negative buoyancy makes you sink. Easy fix: add air to your BC.

Ideally, you should be able to swim perfectly horizontally with your hands either at your sides or folded across your chest. One good test to see if you've got your buoyancy right is to be horizontal, and simply stop kicking. (A fast kick can also overcome negative buoyancy.) If your buoyancy is correct, when you stop kicking, you will neither rise nor sink but simply hover in place. If you do rise, let some air out of your BC. If you sink, you need to put air in. (Chances are that when you do this test, you're more likely to be a sinker than a floater.) But give it a try to see how your buoyancy is.

Once you get it dialed in, you'll use less air because you won't be working as hard against your sinking, and you'll likely enjoy the dive more because you'll also find you don't have to concentrate on your kicking as much and will start doing a better job of looking around and seeing what surrounds you in terms of underwater life.

And don't forget that good buoyancy starts off by being properly weighted . . . but I'll leave that one for another rant down the road.

HURRICANE AFTERMATH

Dominica was especially hard hit by both hurricanes, and sustained a direct hit from Maria. There were 16 deaths reported in Dominica alone. The Facebook page of Castle Comfort says they are all safe but that the resort is currently closed and they're not yet sure when they'll reopen. On Imran Pacquette's FB page, he says everyone is safe. The FB page of Buddy Dive Dominica says that there is one staff member still unaccounted for and they are also closed "for the immediate future."

The U.S. Virgin Islands and British VI were both very hard hit, first by Irma, then by Maria. On BVI, one resident said, "Maria

destroyed most of what was left" (following Irma). Montserrat and Guadeloupe took pretty good hits and electricity was out to most of the places on both islands. That is slowly now being restored. On Turks & Caicos it sounds like most of the operations there are closed for the time being, with some of them projecting a mid-October resumption of diving.

The Florida Keys was hit by Irma but not Maria and it looks like many of those operators are back up and running. There was an article about reef surveys that have been done to assess reef damage and it appears to be rather minimal. In fact, because sand shifted wildly, some new treasures have been unearthed/revealed and some reefs that have had algae issues -

which can essentially choke out the reef - saw that algae stripped away, so there's an upside to some of this too.

Many shops/operators/hotels are using FB to communicate their status. If you've got an upcoming trip, certainly between now and January 1, make sure you check on things before you go. Also understand that areas in the lower part of the Caribbean (Bonaire, Aruba, Curacao, Grenada, Barbados, Cayman) were not in the hurricane path &/or were not affected by the hurricane wind. But still, the best rule of thumb is to check before you go and confirm that whenever you're headed is fully functional, as well as confirming with your airline that the local airport is open and accepting commercial flights.

PICTURE PAGE - Black Sea Bass

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2017)



Black Sea Bass buddies



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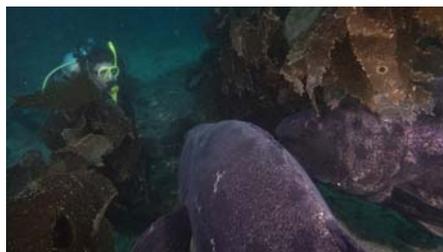
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Posing for the camera



Massive fish



Checking each other out



Making one last pass