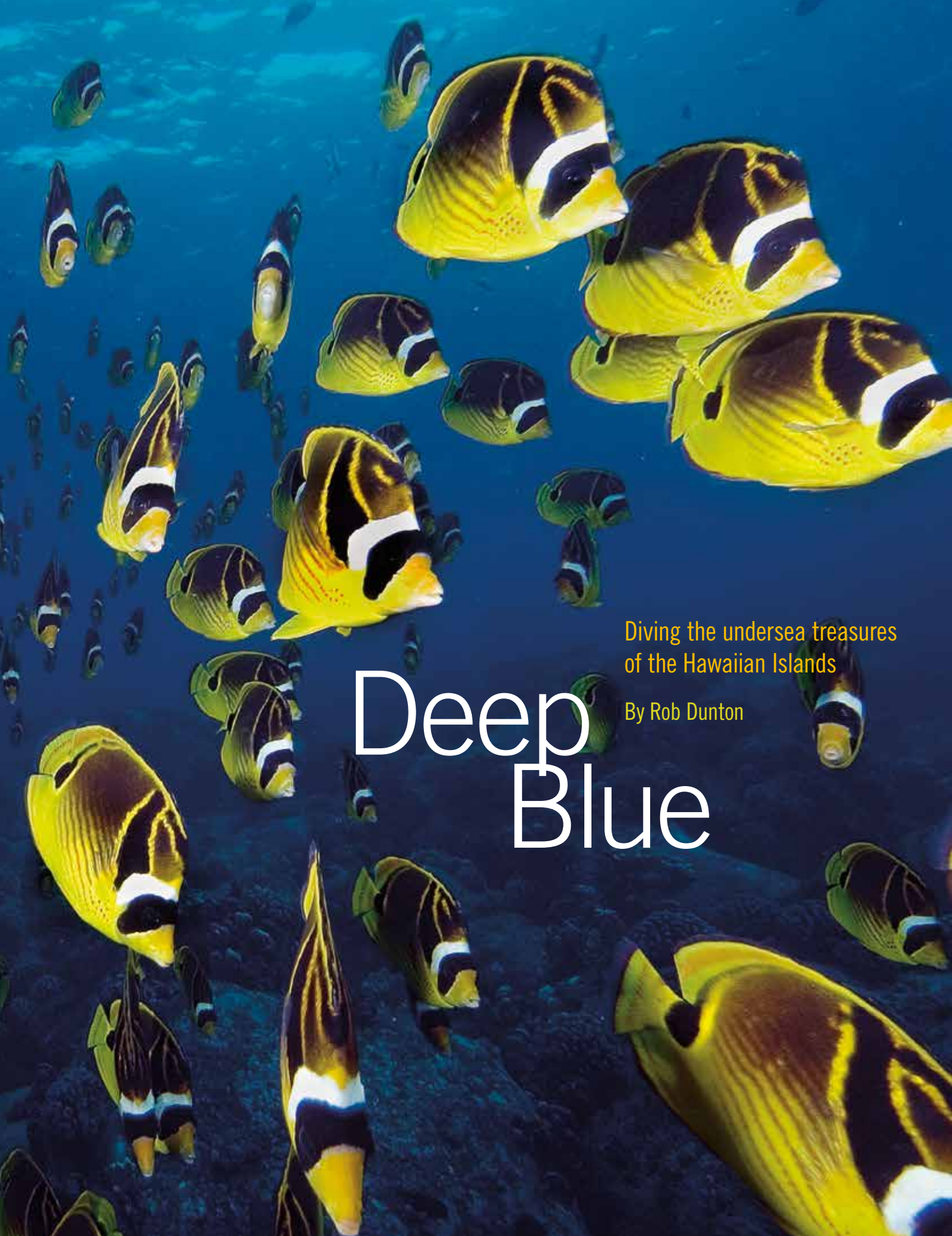


Raccoon butterfly fish
school off the Kona Coast,
a popular dive site on
Hawai'i Island.





Diving the undersea treasures
of the Hawaiian Islands

By Rob Dunton

Deep Blue

RIGHT: Shipwrecks, such as the *Sea Tiger*, off Oahu, attract an abundance of marine life, such as schools of bluestripe snapper. Some ships are sunk intentionally to form artificial reefs.

BOTTOM: Green sea turtles, an endangered species, are a favorite wildlife sighting for divers in Hawai'i.



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The cobalt Pacific laps against the hull of our dive boat as we strap on air tanks and fins. Off our starboard lies iconic Diamond Head, and glimmering high-rises line Waikiki Beach nearby, while 130 feet below us rest the remains of the *Sea Tiger*, a cargo ship scuttled in 1999 to form an artificial reef. I'm with my dive buddy, Kevin Whelan, and our dive master, Will Mauthe, a native of Wisconsin who has been leading dives on O'ahu for the past 11 years. As we stride off the deck into 75 degree water and sink below the surface, the outline of the ship is immediately visible. We descend effortlessly toward the stern and in less than a minute, we approach the deck of the 168-foot-long wreck. More than 300 striped snapper hover in a school nearby, taking advantage of the rusted steel frame encrusted with a tapestry of green, yellow and pink corals and hydroids, and home to a wide array of sea life.

Will leads us through half-court-size openings in the deck to explore the vast

cargo holds, and as we exit we see a spotted eagle ray swimming on the periphery. We continue forward toward the pilothouse—the ship's command center in its heyday. I peer inside and flick on my dive light to illuminate the interior, finding it lush with growth. Butterfly fish dart in and out of the glassless window openings, while a moray eel stares down from a nook near the ceiling. More fish await us inside, enjoying the protection of the enclosed space. Trapped air bubbles expended by previous divers form a mirrorlike ceiling.

We exit the pilothouse, kick past a large green turtle slumbering on the foredeck, then sail over the decayed front railing to drop along the dramatically arched prow to the sand below. We peer up at the massive amalgamation of steel and marine life silhouetted against sun shimmering through 130 feet of azure sea, then make our way back to the surface where our dive boat awaits.

PRO'S PICKS O'AHU

THE PRO: Will Mauthe with Reef Pirates. Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, he's been diving O'ahu for the past 11 years.

TOP PICKS

BABOON'S NOSE—a reef/wall that is outside of Hanauma Bay, accessible by boat a few times a year. Typical sea life consists of turtles, hundreds if not thousands of endemic fish, sharks, whales (November–April), dolphins and some of the most colorful corals you can find on the island.

PORTLOCK/CHINA WALLS—a drift dive on the east side of Maunalua Bay. Only diveable when there is little to no swell and winds are light. There are two turtle cleaning stations here, two caves to enter, and various small caves that are usually full of nonthreatening whitetip reef sharks, Hawaiian dragon morays and Commerson's frogfish. On occasion, there are also pods of spinner dolphins in the distance. During whale season, this is a great amphitheater in which to hear their songs and, one hopes, to see them.

MAHI WRECK—an old World War II minesweeper in Yokohama Bay on the west side of O'ahu. This is probably one of only two spots on O'ahu where you are guaranteed to see schools of spotted eagle rays—up to 10 to 30 at a time. Along with the rays, divers find a variety of sharks: hammerhead, Galapagos, sandbar, whitetip (oceanic and reef).

YO-257/SAN PEDRO WRECKS (both at same dive site). This is by far the best Waikiki dive. Diveable year-round but known for strong currents. Sharks, rays (best thing I've ever seen here was a 20-foot manta in the middle of the day!), schools of barracuda, harlequin shrimp, mantis shrimp and massive turtles.

ROB'S RECOMMENDATIONS: Other notable dive and snorkeling sites are the Firehouse area at Pupukea Beach Park, Kuilima Cove, Makaha Beach Park, Fantasy Reef, Three Tables and Sharks Cove, which has an amazing collection of caves (summer only; can be crowded).



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TOP: A diver at a Maui reef photographs schooling bigscale soldierfish and bluestripe snapper.

ABOVE: Hanauma Bay, east of Honolulu, is a great place for novice snorkelers to explore Hawai'i marine life.

RIGHT: A diver floats in sunlight among lava tube caverns at a dive site known as The Cathedrals, off Lāna'i.

With warm, clear water, excellent topography and abundant animal life, Hawai'i is a magical place for divers of all levels. Located 2,400 miles from the nearest continent, the remote Hawaiian archipelago consists of 132 islands, reefs, seamounts and atolls stretching more than 1,500 miles, and offers some of the finest diving in the United States. Each of the four most accessible islands have distinct undersea personalities with unique sights to explore: O'ahu's wrecks; Hawai'i Island's

giant mantas; Kaua'i's lava tubes and access to sites near Ni'ihau; and Maui's Molokini Crater, with proximity to the grottoes of neighboring Lāna'i and the schooling hammerhead sharks off nearby Moloka'i. While travelers traverse the globe to witness Africa's magnificent animals, equally impressive creatures can be easily spotted within a mile of the islands' shores. Humpback whales (Hawaiian name: *koholā*), giant mantas (*hāhālua*), green sea turtles (*honu*), spinner dolphins



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(*nai'a*) and monk seals (*'ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua*) are but a few of the grand animals living in the surrounding sea. In addition, more than 20 percent of Hawai'i's reef fish are found nowhere else on Earth. The opportunity to safely experience the islands' biodiversity is available to anyone willing to don a mask, slip weightless into warm water and peer into the window of the undersea world.

O'ahu

O'ahu is home to a broad range of excellent snorkeling and dive locations ranging from tranquil bays to lava tubes and wrecks. It is the latter that Kevin and I have come to dive, all but one intentionally sunk to create refuges for local fish and coral along the sandy ocean floor off Waikiki. We selected Reef Pirates as our dive outfitter for its small-group approach to diving (six divers max) and the ability to have a bit more say in where we would dive.

Our second dive takes us to two wrecks: the *San Pedro* (an 80-foot Korean fishing boat sunk as an artificial reef in 1996) and the YO-257 (a 190-foot 1940s U.S. Navy oiler scuttled outside the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor in 1989). We tie up to the mooring line attached to the *San Pedro*, gear up and follow the line to the sunken ship. As we approach the ship's deck, we can see the impact of large storms and swells over the past 17 years. The hull is cracked, with gaping holes throughout, but the core of the ship remains. A large green sea turtle rests in the shadow of the hull, and other turtles swim to and from the vessel. The stern is pitched off the sand, and the propeller and rudder are still intact, covered with colorful corals and hydroids. We pass over steel fragments the size of SUVs as we follow Will 100 yards across the sand to the YO-257. A large school of striped snapper moves slowly near the hull. We glide along the deck, and up and down external stairways. We enter the dark interior, switch on our dive lights and illuminate walls carpeted with corals and algae. We make our way to the base of the ship's large smoke stack and swim into it. As we float up through the oval tube, I hear a distinctive whirring sound. We exit, and Will

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points toward a white Atlantis submarine as it emerges out of the blue. As the sub glides past the wreck, cameras flash from within, and we've become part of someone's vacation stories. We turn around and enjoy a relaxed journey back to the dive boat, where our captain waits to ferry us back to shore.

Will drops us in the heart of Waikīkī at

our hotel, the Hyatt Regency Waikīkī Beach Resort and Spa. We walk past the hotel's massive indoor waterfall and atrium, and head to the resort's Nā Hō'ola Spa for a shower and rejuvenating deep-tissue massage. The spa is elegant, understated and blissful, with superb views of

LEFT: The day octopus is particularly adept at camouflage because it tends to feed in daylight. ABOVE: Monk seals are an uncommon sight in Hawai'i. This one was photographed near the island of Ni'ihau, near Kaua'i.



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Waikiki Beach and the shimmering Pacific. I opt for a Hawaiian-style massage called *lomi lomi* that features a blend of coconut oils, and after an hour, my tired muscles have been rejuvenated.

I'm ready for more diving, and over the next two days, Kevin and I explore more of O'ahu's best scuba and snorkeling sites: the historic Corsair—a World War II fighter plane that ran out of fuel; the Sea Cave—a collapsed underwater cave located

PRO'S PICKS HAWAII ISLAND

THE PRO: Keller Laros. Jack's Diving Locker. Hails from Tiburon, California. Celebrated his 10,000th dive in 2012.

TOP PICKS

MANTA RAY NIGHT DIVES—There are a couple of regular sites dive outfitters visit. Wherever you find the mantas, this is an amazing experience.

SUCK 'EM UP—Don't be frightened by the name. This lava tube is about 90 feet in length with radiant skylights and abundant marine life, and is only 10 minutes away by boat. Frequently spotted are Moorish idols, puffer fish, butterfly fish and a few moray eels.

TURTLE HEAVEN—Green sea turtles here seem as friendly (or curious) as any you'll find, and spinner dolphins are occasionally spotted. Frogfish, pipefish and scorpion fish are also common on this beautiful reef.

PAWAI BAY—a protected marine sanctuary with great fish, lava tubes, arches, exciting topography and a big drop-off. "I was there yesterday, and we had a whale shark swim past," Laros told me.

LA'ALOA/MILE MARKER 4—a great shore dive with interesting lava tubes and arches as a backdrop.

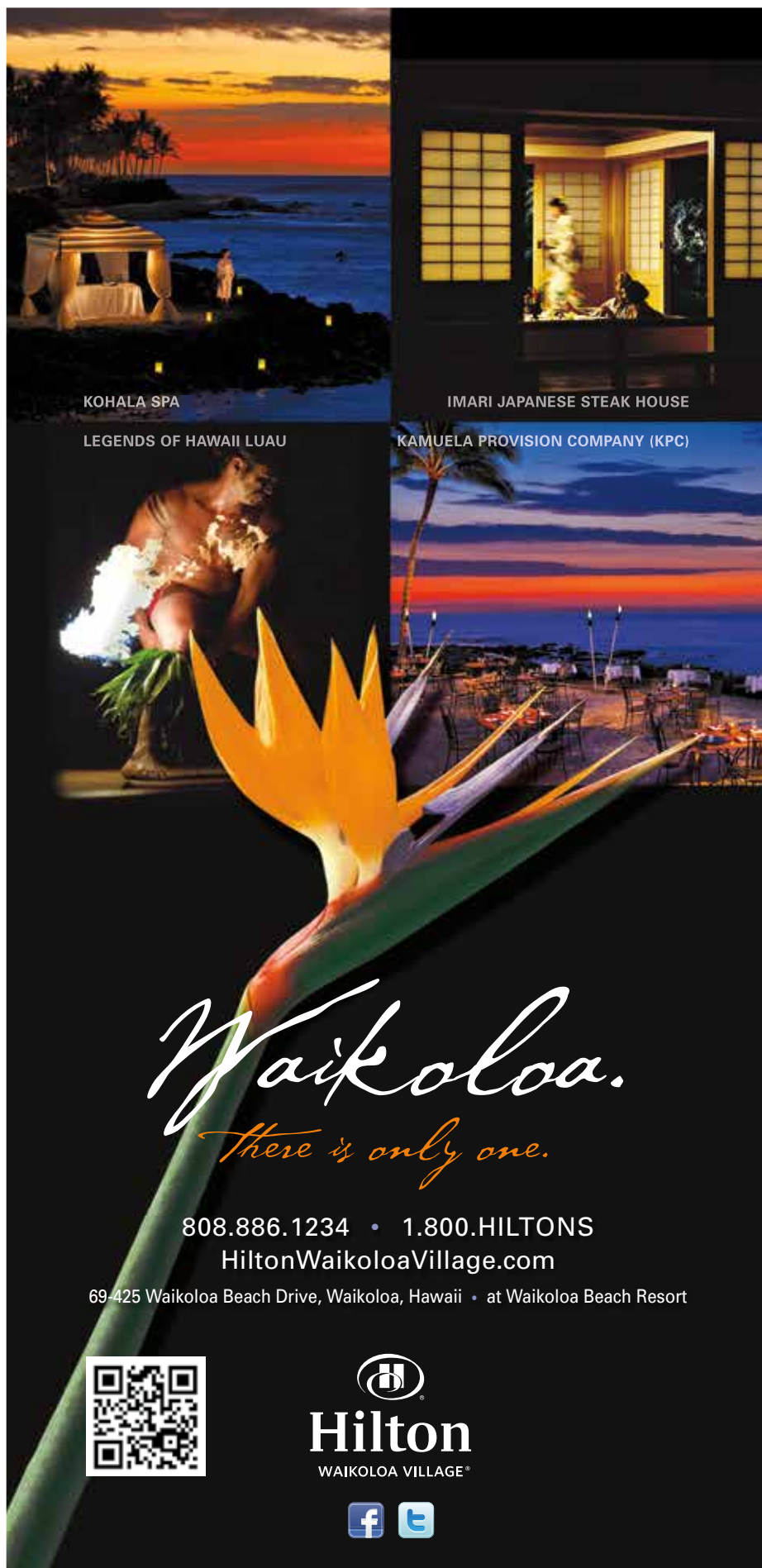
ROB'S RECOMMENDATIONS: For great snorkeling and a look into Hawai'i's past, head to Pu'uuhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park, one of Hawai'i's most sacred places. Adjacent to the 180-acre park on Kealahou Bay is a natural cut in the lava shoreline, locally known as Two Step, that makes for an easy entry for delightful snorkeling and diving—please don't enter or exit the water in the national park area. Fish and sea turtles abound in the area. There are picnic tables close to the entry, and often the local outrigger clubs are out practicing. I saw many spinner dolphins on my last visit to Kealahou Bay.

between Portlock Wall and Paliea Point; and the lava labyrinth at Sharks Cove on the North Shore.

Hawai'i Island

Hawai'i Island is renowned for its giant manta rays, and Garden Eel Cove in Keauhou Bay is one of the best places to spot them. As the birthplace of King Kamehameha III, the town of Keauhou is considered one of the most historically significant places in Hawai'i. While numerous petroglyphs, *heiau* and sacred places, and other important sites in the area draw visitors, Kevin and I choose to spend our first night on Hawai'i Island sitting on the bottom of Keauhou Bay in near total darkness. Flashlight in hand, I wrap my legs around a lava boulder for stability and wait for the mantas to materialize. The sun set an hour ago, and the light emanating from the Fair Wind *Hula Kai* catamaran above me and from the Sheraton Kona Resort & Spa at Keauhou Bay on the adjacent bluff attracts plankton like moths to a flame. The swarms of plankton in turn attract giant mantas. My breathing is rhythmic, almost meditative, punctuated by a stream of bubbles each time I exhale. Minutes tick by slowly, uneventfully. My body rocks with a cadenced sway as mild surface waves expend themselves on the shoreline 50 yards away. Finally, out of the inky blackness, the white wings of a giant manta appear. Heading toward the plankton teeming in front of my dive light, the otherworldly creature glides closer and closer, its skeletal structure clearly visible through its gaping mouth. Swooping in just inches from my head, it makes a slow, graceful arc, funneling the food bonanza into its maw. In minutes, three more mantas emerge to join the dance.

Kneeling on the stony bottom next to us is dive master Katie Christenson. Originally from the Twin Cities, Minnesota, she has spent the past four years leading dives in Kona, and before our dive, delivered an in-depth introduction to giant manta rays on board the *Hula Kai*. She explained that giant mantas do not have stingers like sting rays and are safe to dive and snorkel with. She showed us photographs of the com-



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monly sighted mantas so we could learn each individual's markings, and one by one, I identify the four as they circle around me. The size, majesty and grace of these incredible animals are breathtaking. I'm mesmerized by the experience and lose track of time. After 45 minutes, Katie taps my shoulder and waves her dive light. Time to head back to the ship, where warm showers, hot chocolate and corn chowder await.

The next morning, Kevin and I meet dive master Keller Laros of Jack's Diving Locker and climb aboard the *Kea Nui*. I have found the reef diving along the Kona Coast to offer some of the best visibility and most vibrant corals in the Hawaiian Islands. Keller guides us to two thrilling dive sites. First we explore Kaloko Arches, a maze of perforated lava tubes where brilliant rays of light dramatically light a collection of tunnels and caves, and the fish that reside there. The canyons of stone protect coral structures and minimize surge and current, allowing redlip parrot fish, Hawaiian whitespotted toby and schools of yellow tang and bluestripe snapper to relax in the calm.

Our second dive is at Pawai Bay, a protected marine sanctuary where the quality and diversity of corals is exceptional. Table coral, cauliflower coral, antler coral and spotted coral are just a few of the species I recognize. Keller leads us through fascinating arches, shallow lava tubes and inlets inhabited by fish of every description: longnose and teardrop butterfly fish, damselfish, bluespine unicornfish, black durgan triggerfish and a yellowmargin moray eel, to name just a few. To discover and navigate the secrets of so many unique dive sites, and to identify and learn the habits and personalities of hundreds of fish and sea creatures would take a lifetime. Or you can do what I do: Dive with people such as Keller, who recently celebrated his 10,000th dive.

Maui

Maui holds a special place in my heart. It is where I first scuba dived back in 1985 after a half-day resort course and a catamaran ride to Molokini Crater. For the first time, I



LEFT: A giant manta ray glides past a snorkeler. ABOVE: The Molokini Marine Life Conservation District is the most popular dive area near Maui, with a number of guide operations serving the extinct volcanic crater.

entered the ocean with a tank on my back, and within a minute, a sea turtle swam up as if to welcome me to the other, wetter portion of the planet. On my return home, I completed my scuba certification within 60 days and have been diving ever since—28 years and more than 1,000 dives.

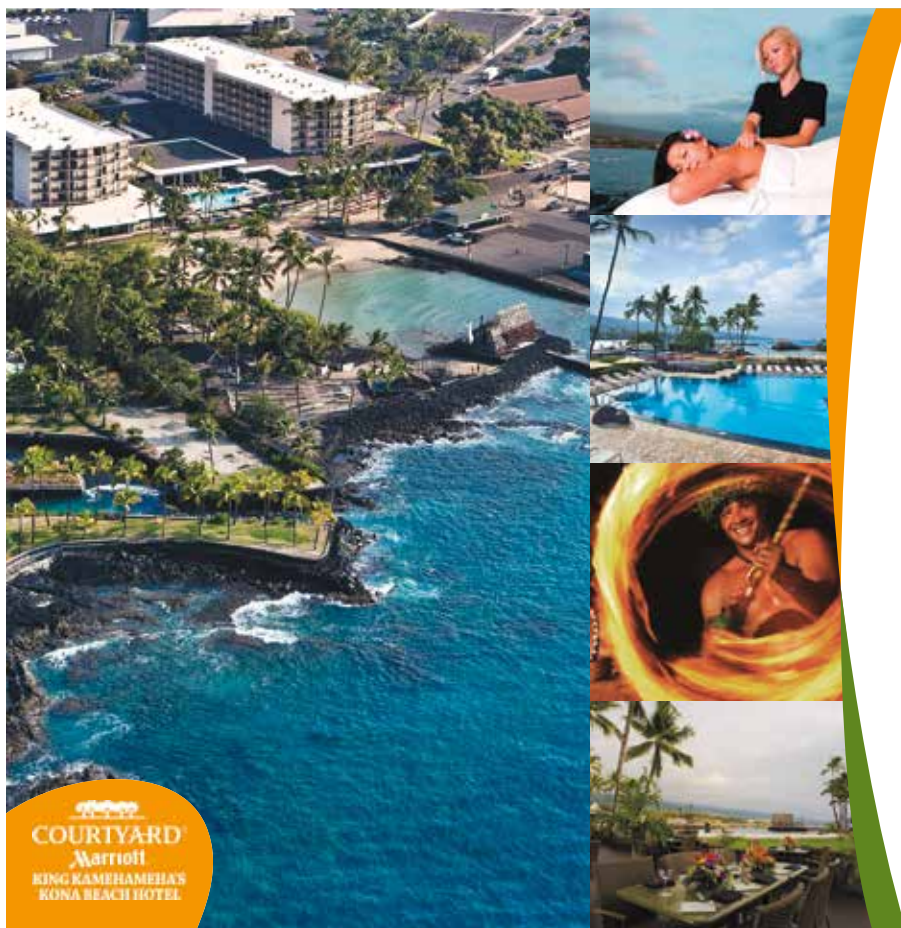
The Molokini Marine Life Conservation District remains the most popular dive area near Maui. It's an extinct volcanic cinder cone situated three miles off the

coast, with considerable marine life and coral formations that appeal to snorkelers as well as divers. There are about a half-dozen frequented dive sites at Molokini. The shallower dives at Tako Flats or Middle Reef run along the large finger reefs that spread out like an open hand inside the crescent. These provide longer dives with good lighting that illuminates the vibrant colors of the fish and corals, but also attracts more divers. More advanced

divers can ride the currents on deeper drift dives along the Back Wall and Reef's End, and seasoned divers looking for a wider array of diving experiences will find plenty on the nearby islands of Lāna'i and Moloka'i.

Having dived Molokini a number of times, on this trip to Maui I spend most of my time diving Lāna'i. After a quick, glassy crossing across Lāna'i Channel, we tie up to a mooring at a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 62



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PRO'S PICKS MAUI

THE PRO: Mikol Westling with Lahaina Divers. Born in San Diego, California, lived in various places up and down the California/Oregon coast, and has been diving for more than 10 years.

TOP PICKS

MOLOKA'I HAMMERHEAD DIVE—This advanced drift dive starts at Fish Rain, where multitudes of fish seemingly rain down in the water column as you drift along Mokuho'oniki Rock. The dive then turns westward as you drift out into the channel, looking for hammerhead sharks, grey reef sharks, Galapagos sharks and other large pelagic species. The one-hour boat ride (each way) to this site is frequently rough.

LĀNA'I DRIFT DIVE—an intermediate dive exploring Lāna'i's unique lava-based topography. This dive offers spectacular traverses through lava tubes, arches and pinnacles, with chances to see raccoon butterfly fish competing for the eggs of sergeant major damselfish, plus longfin anthias, tinker's butterfly fish and nudibranchs including the jolly green giant. As always, keep an eye out for the resident pod of spinner dolphins, manta and spotted eagle rays, and blacktip reef sharks.

CARTHAGINIAN WRECK—once a sail-powered whaling vessel converted to a floating museum, the "Carth" was purposely sunk in 2005 (at a 100-foot depth) and has become a lively and photogenic reef. Keep an eye toward the blue, as some pelagic species have

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FROM PAGE 61 site called Second Cathedral on the island's south side, in clear waters over a reef that is visible 30 feet below. This intermediate site is famous for its maze of arches, caves and caverns, and the rather rare opportunity to see black coral, which usually is found at depths exceeding 150 feet. We drop to the bottom at 65 feet and enter one of the many cave openings. As if I were entering a medieval tower in broad daylight, the comparatively dim interior appears black until my eyes adjust and I see dim light streaming in celestial beams. Our dive master shines a flashlight on the ceiling and illuminates what looks to be a Gothic chandelier, but is a sizable bush of black coral. As we weave in and out of the different chambers, I see schools of bluestripe snapper and bright yellow pyramid butterfly fish. I meet a

been known to cruise by, including spotted eagle rays, blue fin trevally, tuna and manta rays.

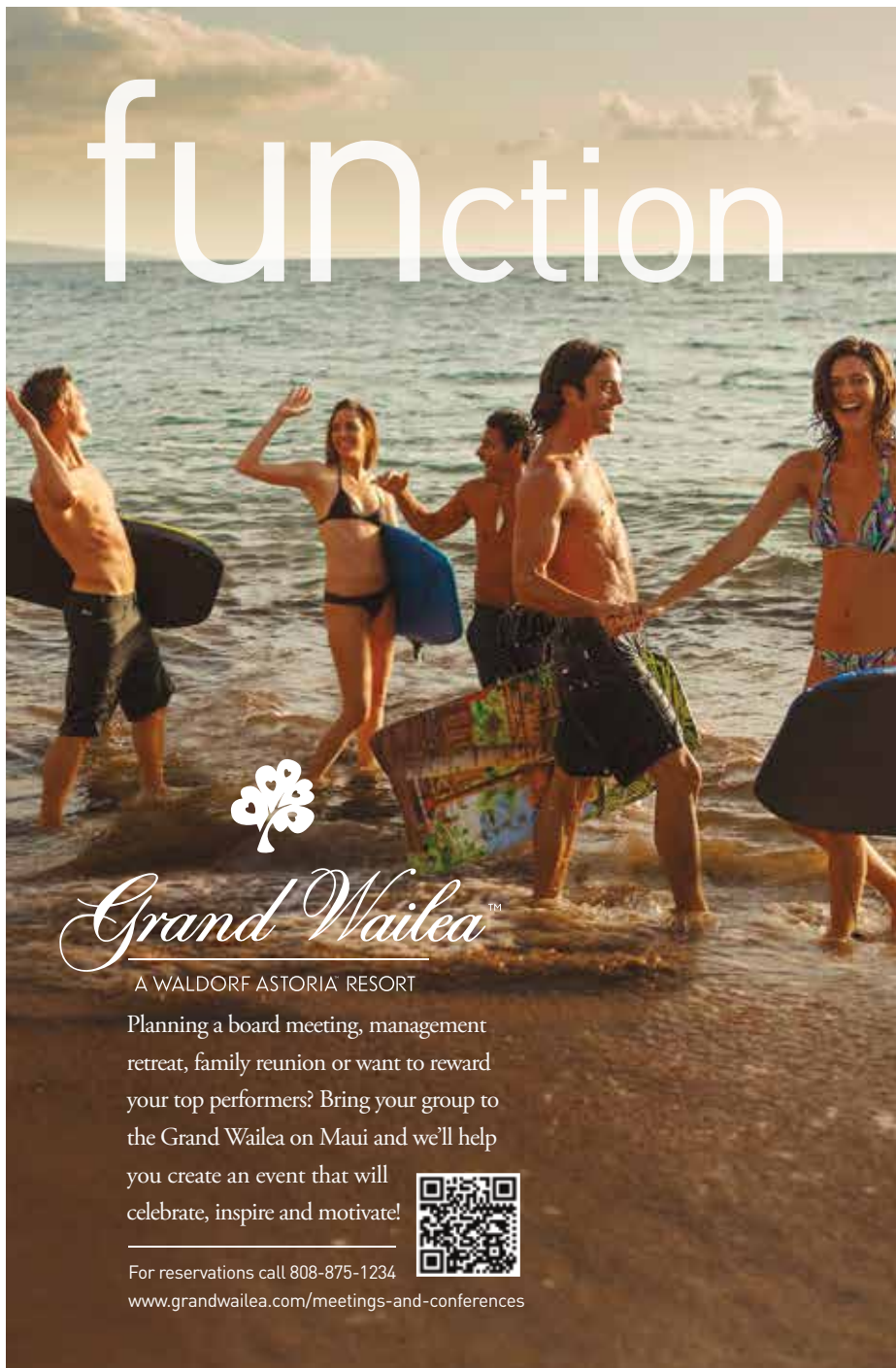
REEF'S END, MOLOKINI CRATER—a dive site near the end of Molokini's crescent reef. The dive starts over a sand channel where divers can see Hawaiian garden eels and freckled snake eels, then continues to the outer edge of the crater where frogfish, white mouth and spotted moray eels, and octopuses, as well as three busy fish-cleaning stations, may be found. Watch for pelagic species cruising by or entering the crater, including bottlenose dolphins and manta and eagle rays.

FIRST AND SECOND CATHEDRAL, LĀNA'I—Formed as lava tubes, these moored sites offer spectacular diving in and through the lava topography of Lāna'i. First Cathedral is a large lava bubble that many say looks like the inside of a church, complete with holes that look like an illuminated altar and stained-glass window. Second Cathedral is a series of swim-through lava tubes and is home to a stand of rare albino black coral known as the Chandelier, which hangs from the ceiling of one of the lava tubes. The Cathedrals are home to large schools of fish, many found hiding in the holes formed by the lava, and have been visited many times by a pod of resident spinner dolphins.

ROB'S RECOMMENDATIONS: Maui also has some great shore dives: Mala Wharf, Five Caves, Ulua Beach, Black Rock, Makena Landing, Napili Bay and Honolua Bay.

curious trumpetfish closer to the surface, and see moray eels peering out from the cracks they call home.

The crossing to the eastern side of neighboring Moloka'i is an adventure in itself, as the Pailolo Channel, 8½ miles wide at its narrowest, is one of the windiest and roughest in the Hawaiian Islands. Once across the channel and beneath the surface, the world is much calmer, though currents remain strong. At a site called Fish Rain, where visibility can reach 150 feet, scores of fish appear to rain down, driven by the natural movements of a water column. As we ride the strong currents along Mokuho'oniki Rock, the currents carry us out into the blue, where one, then five, then dozens of hammerhead sharks undulate in the water above us. With our awkward kicking, metal tanks and loud bubbles, we




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are clearly foreigners in this cerulean landscape, but these powerful pelagics seem oblivious to our presence. Instead, they slowly, gracefully and efficiently torque their bodies to propel themselves through the water that is their home, another world we are fortunate to visit, if only for a time.

Kaua'i

While Hawaiian green sea turtles are regularly spotted throughout the islands, the largest concentrations I've seen are in Kaua'i, and one of the most dependable spots to find them is a dive site called Sheraton Caverns on the South Shore of Kaua'i—a labyrinth of lava tubes cooled by the sea and forming a residence for dozens

PRO'S PICKS KAUAI

THE PRO: Sabine Templeton, formerly with Seasport Divers. From Baltimore, Maryland, she has been diving professionally since 2007.

TOP PICKS

VERTICAL AWARENESS, NI'HAU—breathtaking topography with sheer vertical cliffs and lots of sea life: schooling jacks, octopuses, the endangered monk seal, and pelagics such as sandbar sharks, gray reef sharks and whitetip reef sharks (summer only).

KEYHOLE DRIFT DIVE, NI'HAU—a stunning hole through the wall of the half-submerged volcanic crater called Lehua Rock. This is a drift dive along a steep wall beginning with huge schools of pennant and pyramid butterfly fish, schooling horse-eyed jacks, and gray and whitetip reef sharks suspended in the current; also a great spot for large eagle rays. Surface inside the crater, which is a favorite gathering place for spinner dolphins (summer only).

TURTLE BLUFFS, SOUTH SHORE—lava-rock ledge with sparse coral cover but tons of marine life. This is one of the most reliable spots for whitetip reef sharks—juveniles and adults sleeping under ledges. Octopuses, leaf scorpions and yellow margin moray eels are commonly seen here. The best part of the dive is a green-turtle cleaning station atop a 40-foot plateau where turtles lie suspended in midwater while green-eyed surgeons, achilles and yellow tangs rid them of parasites and algae growth. Lucky groups of divers may be blessed with humpback whale sightings in winter at this site.

SHERATON CAVERNS, SOUTH SHORE—hands down the most popular and loved dive

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site for two main reasons: swim-throughs and lots and lots of green sea turtles, as well as many nudibranchs and fish species.

KOLOA LANDING, SOUTH SHORE—once the second-largest whaling port in the state of Hawai'i, this shallow cove is now a popular shore dive for students and instructors as well as seasoned divers. This is a small, protected bay, and you can almost always count on calm surface conditions and minimal current. Pieces of anchor chain from the whalers of the 1800s can be found throughout the site.

ROB'S RECOMMENDATIONS: During the calm summer months, great scenery, snorkeling and turtle encounters can be had on the North Shore at Ke'e Beach (outside the reef) and Tunnels. As Sabine notes above, neighboring Ni'ihau offers divers some of the most pristine diving in the area (though it is a 2- to 3.5-hour channel crossing each way and can be rough).

of sea turtles and other sea life.

At Kukui'ula Harbor near Poipu, Kevin and I join Seasport Divers, one of the most established dive shops on Kaua'i. We meet Sabine Templeton, a native of Baltimore who had planned on earning a degree in marine biology, but couldn't face spending that much time out of the water so became a dive instructor instead.

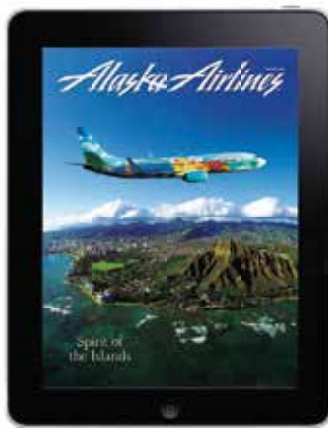
A Seasport captain motors us out to Sheraton Caverns, located just past the surf break in front of the Sheraton Kaua'i Resort where Kevin and I are staying. We gear up, preview the site and follow Sabine into the water. With my hand on my regulator, I step off the dive boat and into the warm emerald waters. Just a few feet below the surface, a school of brilliant yellow convict tang approaches us and flutters about our fins. At 35 feet we reach the top of the reef, and as we drop into the narrow canyons and fingers, the place reminds me of a sunken edifice created by Antoni Gaudí and M.C. Escher. Passageways, ravines and tunnels twist, curve and fold in upon themselves, creating a rounded, organic apartment complex for turtles and other sea life. The first turtle we see floats by in a slow, effortless ascent toward the surface. Sabine points out various nudibranchs, frogfish, pennant butterfly fish, triggerfish and a camouflaged octopus that seems almost invisible. Every few minutes, we come across a new turtle—some feed; others head



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to the surface for a breath of air; still others seem to doze on shaded ledges and in the shallow caves within the reef. The lava rock is carpeted with a wide array of textured corals and algae, a source of food for the turtles and fish. As we move deeper into the ravines and lava tubes, sunbeams dramatically illuminate the dark spaces. When we return to the boat, I am astounded to think that this magical microcosm of the under-sea world exists just 100 yards offshore from our hotel rooms.

We next dive Fast Lanes, a slightly deeper site at 55 feet to 95 feet with a similar lava flow terrain. We explore the little channels and spot needlefish, blue-spotted cornetfish, two whitetip reef sharks (6 feet to 7 feet long), turtles, a moray eel and a school of 100 eyestripe surgeonfish. As I watch Sabine playfully kick on her back above the ocean floor with a school of fish surrounding her, I understand her decision to abandon her pursuit of a degree in marine biology to spend more time in places like this. ▲

Author's Note: People frequently ask me about my favorite dive sites in Hawai'i. Most are highlighted here, and others are included in the lists provided by local dive masters. Conditions and crowds vary dramatically from day to day, and wildlife sightings are unpredictable. Changing sea conditions can render a great dive site a silt-ridden dive on any given day. Pick a good dive outfitter with quality staff, gear and boats, and trust them—they want the best dive experience as much as you do. For a broad overview of dive sites in the islands, have a look at hawaiiiscubadiving.com.

Rob Dunton is a freelance travel writer and photographer based in Santa Barbara.

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