

# Liveboards and The Stockholm Syndrome

by Colin Marshall

Liveboards are fantastic vehicles to reach pristine, unspoilt and otherwise inaccessible locations. And the diving is “easy” - once you arrive onboard, you just set up your gear once at the start. After that, all you have to do is stagger onto a dive tender, enjoy the short ride to the dive site, don your gear and slip into the water. And repeat, diving up to four times a day, in a variety of different locations. Paradise!

But sometimes (fortunately rarely), there are problems in paradise.

## Potential Problems

### 1. The Boat

Liveboard diving inevitably involves putting sensitive machinery and electrics in close proximity to salt water. This continuously taunts Mother Nature, begging for trouble. And trouble inevitably comes.

Perhaps the worst boat disaster story I’ve heard (from one of the actual guests) was of ascending from a dive to the sight of the liveboard on fire and sinking. All were rescued, but

lost literally everything; computers, passports etc.

More common problems with boats affecting guests generally involve issues with air conditioning, toilets and leaks - though major problems can also occur with engines, sometimes resulting in a compromised, more restricted, itinerary than expected.

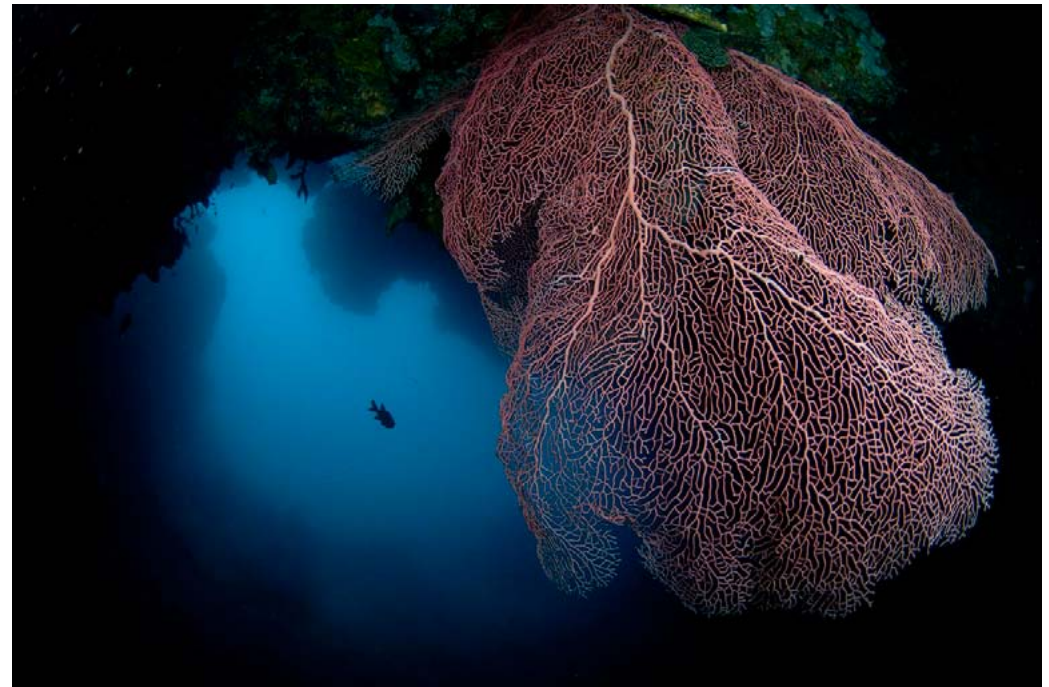
The most critical failure I have experienced was on the 3rd day of a 12-day trip, when the entire central air

*Liveboards arguably give more opportunity for wide-angle photography than land-based trips, such as this cave in Farondi in Raja Ampat*

*Subal, Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 mm f3.5-4.5, 2 x Inon Z240, 1 / 125, f3.5, ISO 160*

*Liveboards often provide opportunities to see larger fish, such as this Grey Reef Shark (Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos)*

*Subal, Nikon D7000, Nikkor 105 mm f2.8, 2 x Inon Z240, 1/250, f4, ISO 200*





*New, less accessible, areas, may allow one to see some new animals – such as this Gilded Triggerfish (*Xanthichthys auromarginatus*) seen for the first time by the author last month in the Forgotten Islands*

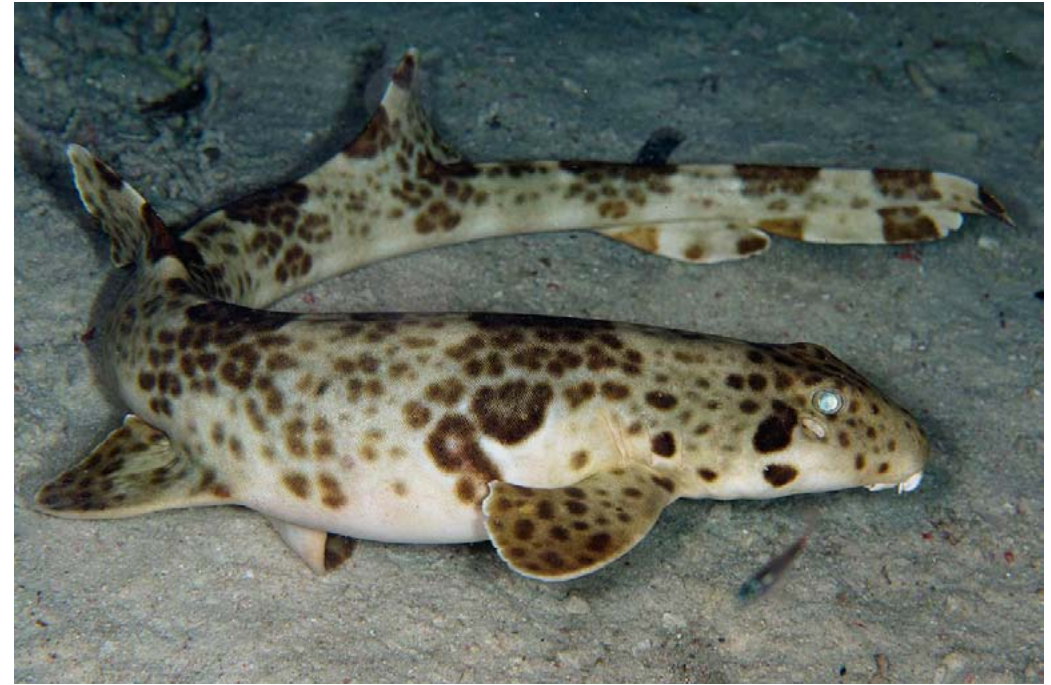
*Subal, Nikon D7000, Nikkor 105 mm f 2.8. 2 x Inon Z240, 1/250, f 3.2, ISO 200*

conditioning failed and could not be fixed until the boat returned to port. They did have a stash of fans, but these offered little respite, especially for the below-deck cabins. Most of the guests spent the entire trip sleeping on the deck under the stars - charming for one night, but uncomfortable for ten. One could be generous and say “accidents happen”, but considering the catalogue of incidents accumulated by this vessel during its brief life span, my conclusion leaned

towards incompetent management and an inadequate or nonexistent maintenance program. Lesson learnt was to only use boats with individual aircons in cabins.

## 2. The Cruise Director

The Cruise Director on a liveaboard has the most interaction with guests, and exercises the most influence on clients’ enjoyment of the trip. And generally, most Cruise Directors are excellent.



*Similarly, one has the chance to see fish that are endemic to a particular (remote) area, like this Raja Epauvette Walking Shark (*Hemiscyllium freycineti*) in Raja Ampat*

*Subal, Nikon D7000, Nikkor 60 mm f 2.8. 2 x Inon Z240, 1/160, f 8, ISO 200*

Great people skills, well organized, good communicators. But there are exceptions.

My last trip had the worst Cruise Director I have ever experienced. Her response to most requests was an automatic “No”, whether it was to allow guests to make a brief land excursion when the boat was near a town, providing options (such as diving instead of land excursion), or changing dive locations when a site didn’t work out. (We did three dives

on one site which was the worst dive site I have visited on a liveaboard).

This same Cruise Director also cancelled a night dive, saying “the village said no”. That could conceivably have been true, but the problem was likely solvable with a slightly larger donation to the village, or finding an alternate island.

The owner subsequently said he and his staff “respect the wishes of the villagers and do not push back”. Well, I want my Cruise Director to

make reasonable efforts to push back (or make a better offer) to make my trip as good as possible, as opposed to just being overly-compliant to protect their future trips. But my suspicion is that the Cruise Director, wanting the night off, walked into the Chief's hut and said something like "Holy cow, looking at your wife, I can see why your daughters are so ugly. Changing the subject, do you have a problem if we do a night dive on your island tonight?"

### 3. The Guests

One of the most serious problems being on a liveaboard is the difficulty in getting away from your fellow shipmates. Most liveaboard dive boats are relatively small, with limited communal and deck space areas.

How much of a problem this is depends on your own degree of tolerance. If you are easy-going and relaxed, socializing with the other guests can be an enriching and pleasant experience. People who choose to go on liveaboards often share common interests, and can be useful sources of information and advice about diving locations and marine life.

It can be risky to join a boat where most of the guests are part of a single party who all know each other, especially if that group is more interested in partying than

diving. Most boats have music systems, which some inconsiderate guests will play loud into the night. In principle, the Cruise Director should be expected to take control of these situations and seek reasonable compromises - but this depends on the Cruise Director.

Some guests are the "daredevil" types - diving deep, doing solo dives, practising dangerous dive profiles, racking up mandatory decompression obligations, getting close to "dangerous" animals (such as Komodo Dragons). The genuine concern is that such cavalier actions will result in a serious accident or injury, such as an animal bite or

*Liveaboards can access underwater sea pinnacles, in great visibility, like this one – notice the fish hiding from the divers on the other side of the pinnacle! Subal, Nikon D70, Nikkor 60 mm f 2.8, 2 x Inon Z240, 1 / 80, f 2.8. ISO 320*

*Liveaboards generally offer dives on most nights, giving the chance to see a whole different sub-set of animals, such as this Bigfin Reef Squid (Sepioteuthis lessoniana) Subal, Nikon D7000, Nikkor 60 mm f 2.8, 2 x Sea & Sea YS110, 1 / 160. f 13 ISO 160*





*Liveaboards also allow one to meet locals who are happy to interact with divers, like this fisherman*

*Subal, Nikon D7000, Tokina 10-17 mm f 3.5-4.5, 2 x Inon Z240, 1 / 160, f 20. ISO200*

decompression sickness, which would require diverting to the nearest location with medical treatment or evacuation facilities. Such a change in itinerary can have a huge effect on the other guests. How uptight to get about other guests' risky behavior is ultimately a personal decision. I would suggest that humans are poor at assessing risk and commonly over-estimate the degree of risk in a situation. There is a huge grey area between irresponsible daredevil acts and just enjoying life. In other words,

I'd suggest not worrying too much about what might happen – just don't buddy up with people you don't trust!

#### **4. The Weather**

Admittedly, the liveaboard cruise guide or captain cannot control the weather. However, the approach adopted in anticipation of possibly adverse weather conditions can vary significantly. Some boats avoid any possible risk of being delayed by weather and failing to make it to the final port on time to drop off old



*And occasionally one has the chance to entertain the locals in the shallows*  
*Subal, Nikon D700, Tokina 10-17 mm f 3.5-4.5, 2 x Inon Z240, 1 / 250, f 10. ISO160*

guests at the airport, take on supplies, and pick up new guests. Up to a point, this is understandable. But some boats continuously rush guests to get to the next destination early, "just in case the weather gets worse". This quickly becomes tedious, especially when one ends up missing or cutting short dives or excursions, only to arrive unnecessarily early at the next destination point, on dead calm seas.

This is obviously a balance and most liveaboards get it right, but some can be excessively generous with their

guests' time (and money) to avoid even the slightest risk of delay.

#### **The Stockholm Syndrome**

So where does the Stockholm Syndrome fit in?

According to Wikipedia, "Stockholm syndrome, or capture-bonding, is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and sympathy and have positive feelings toward their captors, sometimes to the point of

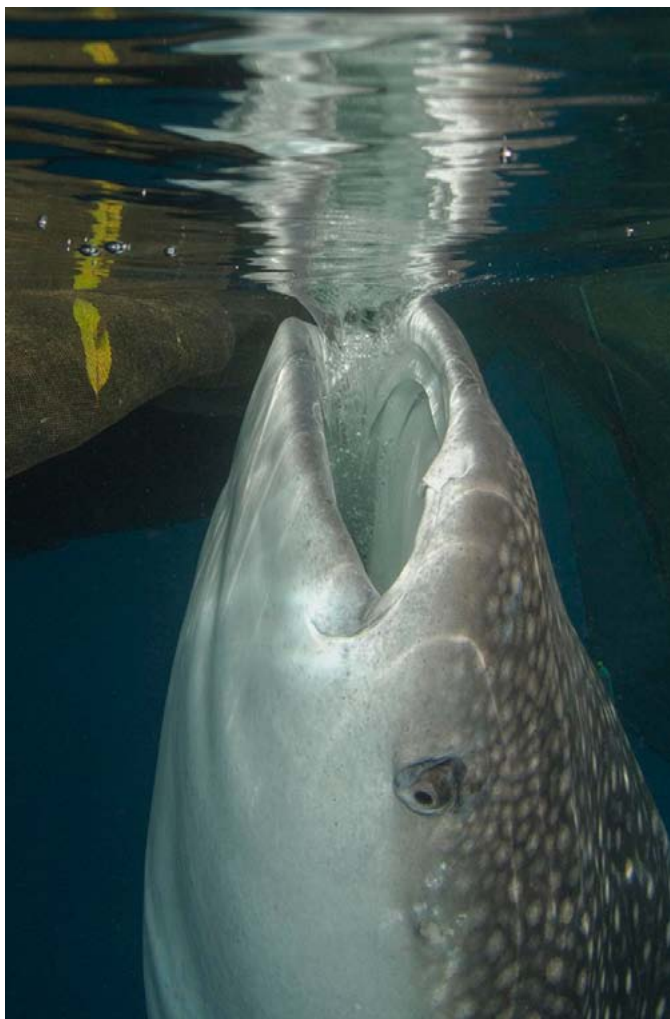
defending and identifying with the captors”.

When one reads reviews on liveaboard websites, on Facebook, or in the comments books onboard, most of the reviews tend to be effusive, with comments like “the best trip ever”. The statistical impossibility that so many liveaboards are “the best ever” can be overlooked. People are simply trying to express their appreciation for what they found to be a highly enjoyable experience.

But perhaps something else is going on. Investing a significant amount of money and valuable holiday time on a liveaboard itself can be a powerful subconscious motivator to perceive the experience in positive terms and to document the trip on Facebook - that well-known vehicle for narcissism, gloating and bragging - as sensational when the reality was somewhat different.

This can even lead people to ignore or deny serious onboard problems, lest dealing with those issues threatens the illusion the “best trip ever”. A clue that this may be happening is when guests defend incompetence or exploitation by the liveaboard boat management, as doing otherwise could negate their “excellent” experience and their judgment in selecting “the best liveaboard in the world.”

As an example, when I had the “village says no” night dive non-experience, I asked some other guests if they had experienced this excuse before. The answer was “yes, quite often, this is normal”. But further investigation revealed they had only experienced this excuse in other locations on the same boat with the same Cruise Director. The possibility that the Cruise Director was using the village as an excuse not to do night dives for her own convenience never seemed to enter their heads. Instead, they defended the Cruise Director.



*Liveaboards sometimes include special highlights on their tours, such as Whale Sharks (*Rhincodon typus*) in Cendrawasih Bay*

*Subal, Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17 mm f 3.5-4.5, 2 x Inon Z240, 1 / 200, f 11. ISO 250*

Stockholm Syndrome?

Bottom line – when someone recommends a liveaboard, ask how many other boats they have been on. I have done about 20 trips - not a huge



*Land excursions in places like Komodo give opportunities to see special terrestrial animals. Note my wife cleverly using our 2-year old child to draw the attention of the Dragon away from me...*

*Subal, Nikon D700, Nikkor 24-70 f 2.8, 1/500, f 9. ISO160*

number, and I consider myself barely qualified to write this article. But of these 20 trips, I have been on only two boats more than once (one, 8 times). I don't think I am suffering from the Stockholm



Syndrome on my preferred liveaboard. In fact my last trip was on a new liveaboard (which I will not make it to twice). And I am not mentioning my preferred liveaboard to ensure I cannot be accused of seeking favours. But I will happily provide the name of that liveaboard (and churlishly take pleasure in naming the two I would never sail on again) to anyone who contacts me directly...

## Resolving Problems - Before and After

Before committing to a liveaboard, ask as many questions as you can on issues that you care about. How many day dives are likely,

how many night dives, and what will happen if you happen to be the only one who wants to do a certain dive? Get them to make their position clear and upfront. And if they fudge these questions, avoiding specificity, saying "it depends on the weather / Cruise Director / local villagers", then be highly cautious.

If (or perhaps when) something does go wrong, make your complaint clearly and quickly to the Cruise Director. Ensure that all guests get to participate in any conversations that involve consequences, for example changes in the itinerary or route. Some Cruise Directors will make unilateral decisions without

consulting guests and then simply present the new plan later.

If a material event occurs, raise the question of compensation early. Be as imaginative as possible in coming up with compensation. The owners may be open to offering discounted trips in the event of last minute cancellations - a low cost remedy to them.

I once had a boat crew, unsolicited, unscrew my spare housing domeport, and then dunk the unprotected camera into the fresh water tank (all while I was underwater) - this is a "material event"! They replaced the camera and lens - but did not pay for housing servicing nor compensate for the fact I could not take any wide-angle images on that trip. I considered this a failed negotiation on my part and an unsatisfactory outcome.

In the case of the boat where the airconditioning failed for the entire trip, the owner gave the clients a 33% refund. Again, this was an unsatisfactory outcome; a free trip would have been fair. If I was faced with two boats going to the same destination, but one was 33% cheaper but with no aircon, I would invariably choose the boat with aircon at the non-discounted price. The owner's perverse logic was something along the lines of "clients are paying 33% for the diving, 33% for the boat and

33% for the food". Which implies that if there was no diving (or no food) for the entire trip, everyone would be happy to accept a 33% discount, which is patently ridiculous. The owner was happily taking the clients money while expecting them to bear the risks and costs of consequences of his sloppy management.

Bottom line - most liveaboard trips are superb and highly enjoyable. In the unlikely case of material negative event, don't let it ruin your holiday, but conversely don't fall victim to the Stockholm Syndrome and let the boat off the hook! There are many boats out there, a lot of fish in the sea so to speak, and some are better than others and some may fit with you better than others...

**Colin Marshall**

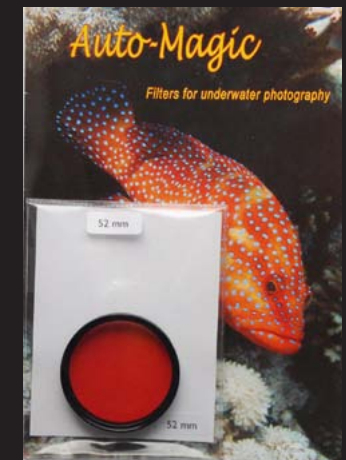
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