

PARADISE DIVE CLUB

Islas Revillagigedo Trip Report



Upcoming Meetings

Club meetings at Cody's Cafe

March 31
April 28
May 26

Deco Stops at TBA

5:30pm, 2nd Friday
after the club meetings

Club Sponsors

- [Truth Aquatics](#)
- [Santa Barbara Aquatics](#)
- [Blue Water Hunter](#)
- [The Eagle Inn](#)
- [Channel Island Dive Adventures](#)

Editor's Note

This special edition of the club's newsletter is dedicated to a live-aboard dive trip to the Revillagigedo Archipelago. This is a group of four volcanic islands some 250 miles south west of Cabo San Lucas ([link to Google Maps](#)) that are more commonly known as the Socorro Islands. They are primarily known for big animal diving: sharks, manta rays, humpback whales, whale sharks. Jacek went on this trip in March 2015 aboard the Nautilus Belle Amie. Story and photos by Jacek Smits.

Islas Revillagigedo Trip

My good friend Petrula and I booked ourselves on the Belle Amie directly with Nautilus on a late March trip to the Socorro Islands. We had been there aboard the Nautilus Explorer, the Belle Amie's sister ship, in 2007 and wanted to go back ever since because of the amazing experience we had diving with big animals.



Belle Amie at San Benedicto Island

Dive Club Officers

President	Paul Bullock
VP	Christina Grabowsky
Past President	Kellen Tobin
Treasurer	Jim Axtell
Secretary	Rich Cirincione
Membership	Ivan Girling
Sergeant at Arms	Lynn Axtell
Entertainment	Juan Beltranena
Social Media	Jacek Smits
Publications	Jacek Smits

Mission Statement

Paradise Dive Club is a diving and social club. The Club provides a setting that allows continued growth in our sport and one where friendships can develop and flourish. Paradise Dive Club promotes fun, safe diving related activities and environmental awareness. The Club was founded to provide social and recreational opportunities to people with mutual interests in snorkeling, scuba and free diving, and to educate and inform its members and the general public in matters related to diving and the ocean, particularly in regard to issues involving coastal Santa Barbara County.

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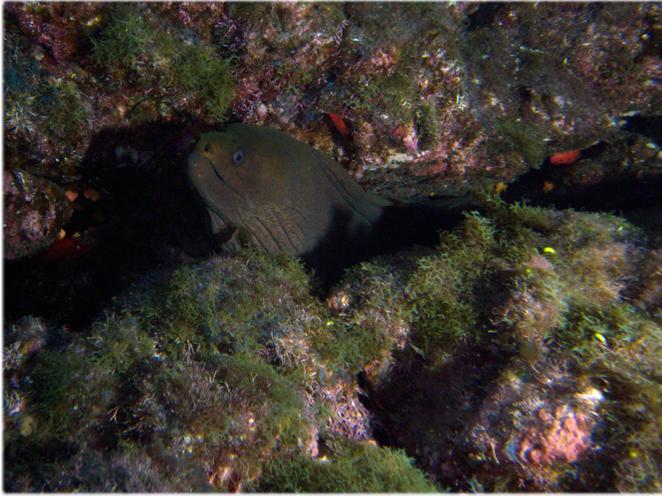
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The Nautilus Belle Amie

The [Nautilus Belle Amie](#) is a brand new ship. The Nautilus organization bought it as an empty hull and designed and built the interior to turn it into a dive boat. Turns out we were on the maiden voyage. We were supposed to be on the second trip of the Belle Amie but they didn't get it ready in time so the first trip was canceled at the last moment. Departure was from Cabo San Lucas, which is easy to get to from southern California with direct flights from LAX. We flew to Cabo the day before departure and everything went so smooth that from home in Los Angeles to the hotel in Cabo took only 6 hours. We stayed at the [Los Milagros Hotel](#) and, on the owner's recommendation, we had dinner at [Misiones De Kino](#). Both I can wholeheartedly recommend if you find yourself in Cabo some day. The next day we had arranged transfer from our hotel to the dock with a taxi operator recommended by Nautilus, but there was some miscommunication between the two so we, along with some 12 other divers, were dropped off at the wrong dock. We ended up walking 10 minutes around the harbor. In the end we arrived at the correct dock at 8:15am ready to board for the scheduled 9am departure and breakfast. That's when it became pretty clear there were some unresolved issues with the Belle Amie. They were supposed to fuel up overnight for our 9am departure but a failed fuel pump prevented that. The Belle Amie was still at the fuel dock and a long wait started. In addition, they had unresolved paperwork issues with the harbor master. Long story short, we



Manta ray at *The Boiler*, San Benedicto Island

Eel at *El Cañon*, San Benedicto IslandManta ray at *The Boiler*, San Benedicto IslandSkiff at *El Fondeadero*, San Benedicto Island

finally boarded at 10:15am and departed at 4:15pm. Effectively we lost a day of diving. Originally, the diving was supposed to start Friday morning after an overnight crossing to San Benedicto Island but we wouldn't be able to get there until mid afternoon. During the evening briefing we were told how the diving would be organized for the week and that nitrox would not be available on this trip because a part of the nitrox system hadn't arrived on time. We were also told that the Nautilus Lifeline units we were promised (a small marine radio with GPS that can be used to locate divers that get swept out to sea) hadn't arrived yet either but we would meet up with the Nautilus Explorer the next day and they would transfer them. Unfortunately, because I was told they would be made available I left my personal one at home. There were 30 divers and 11 crew members on board. The diving was organized with 3 skiffs. They would divide the divers up in three groups of ten divers each and would drop them off staggered twenty minutes apart and at different sites if possible. All dives would be limited to one hour, including the safety stop. Furthermore, there might still be a few things that needed fixing so, please, let the crew know if something happens and they'll take care of it right away.

San Benedicto Island

Overnight the captain ran the engines a little harder to try and make up for lost time. Friday morning several crew members were still working on getting the ship in order so they could actually run a dive operation: they spent most of the morning creating the whips so they could fill the tanks. Other crew members ran around the ship fixing things the passengers reported as broken. It was a busy morning for them. We finally arrived at San Benedicto around 1pm Friday and did our first dive at *El Fondeadero*

around 3:15pm followed by a 30 minute second dive at the same site at 6:15pm. This was a nice dusk dive but the captain did not want to turn it into a night dive. Hence the short dive time. Multiple manta rays showed up within five minutes of descending on the first dive and for a checkout dive it was a great dive.

The second day at San Benedicto started at a dive site called *The Boiler*. We had a late start because of problems with a skiff but the dive was fantastic with numerous manta rays showing up and continuing to play with us for the entire dive up to and including the safety stop. This is what diving the Socorro islands is all about. The delays were forgotten, everything was great and the passengers stoked.



Diver and manta ray at *The Boiler*, San Benedicto Island

Unfortunately, more problems showed up and a second skiff became unusable. The captain decided to move to *El Cañon*, another dive site in a more protected cove where the waters were calmer so they could work on the 2 broken skiffs. They ran the dive operation by giants strides of the back deck, following the anchor line down, and one skiff in the water to pick up divers after the dive. Less than ideal with lots of delays and shortened dives towards the end of the day. The problem with *El Cañon* site is that it is a deep dive (80-90 feet) and doing four hour-long deep dives on air with relatively short surface intervals is not my idea of a good time. Unless big sharks show up it's not that interesting a dive either and the waters were murky so I decided to sit out the last dive because of my nitrogen load. Other divers chose to go into deco, apparently, but no exciting sightings were reported on the three dives at *El Cañon*. The crew was able to fix one of the skiffs but the other one was beyond repair so we were down to 2 skiffs for 30 divers for the rest of trip.



Diving the wall at *Roca Partida*

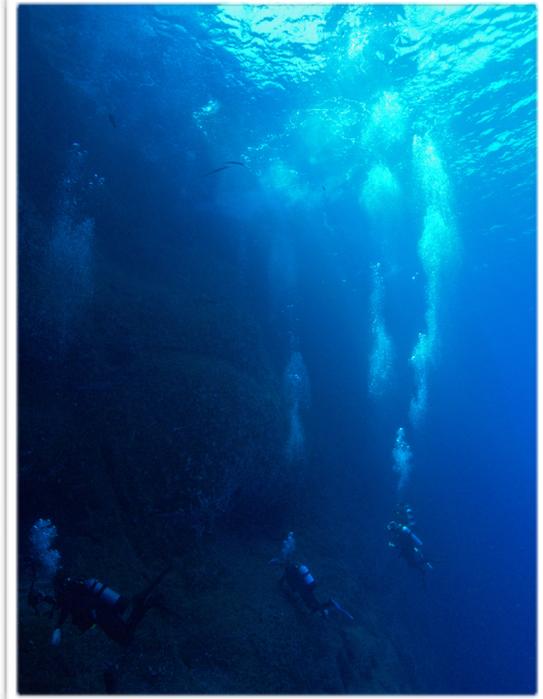
Socorro Island

Overnight we moved to Socorro Island and started diving at a dive site called *Cabo Pearce*. On the way to my first dive of the day the engine on our skiff conked out. After 10 minutes of trying to restart it, and drifting halfway back to the Belle Amie, we decided to roll in where we were, do a long surface swim to the island, drop down next to the wall and then a long underwater swim to the actual dive site.

There were a few manta flybys and we saw some shark silhouettes in the distance, but that was it. We stayed the whole day at this site while the crew tried to repair the skiff. Because we were down to one skiff for 30 divers again all the diving got rescheduled and delayed, and we had three dives instead of four. On my second dive that day the current came on so fast and so incredibly strong that 8 out of 10 divers in our group, including myself, were swept out to sea and had to be picked up to nearly 3/4 mile from the boat. Where were those Nautilus Lifelines they had promised us? It was a decent site for diving. We did have some great manta action and we could hear whales singing in the background all day long, but it wasn't good enough for three dives on that one site and the dive operation was chaotic with not enough communication from the crew about what was going on and how things were running. It was a frustrating day for crew and passengers. They also couldn't repair the skiff so for the rest of the trip (four days) we were down to a single skiff and all diving would be limited to three hour-long dives per day instead of four. More problems with the Belle Amie itself showed up and the passengers became unhappy and started grumbling a bit.

Roca Partida

Overnight we moved to Roca Partida for two days of diving. This is a volcanic pinnacle that comes up from some 10,000 feet down and it is the only land mass around for as far as the eyes can see and then some. We did six dives over two days. On both days the first group in the water got to play with dolphins and saw lots of hammerhead and Galapagos sharks. Other than those in the early morning not much big life showed up and without those Roca Partida (bottom left photo) is an interesting dive site but not necessarily for six dives in a row. I didn't see the dolphins, hammerheads, or Galapagos sharks. There were no manta rays either. As you can see in the picture above (maybe not), all divers are looking at the wall of Roca Partida. Often divers will have their back to the wall because they're looking out into



Diving the wall at *Roca Partida*



Skiff at *Roca Partida*



Pile of white tip sharks at Roca Partida

the blue where the big animals are.

Back to San Benedicto Island

After Roca Partida we went back to San Benedicto Island for more diving at *The Boiler*. It is now Wednesday. Everybody had two amazing dives with mantas showing up all dive long up to and including safety stops and final ascents. Even after we had climbed in the skiff at the end of the dive we had mantas circling the skiff just below the surface for a bit. We heard humpback whales singing all day long but never got to see them underwater. They did put on quite a few shows for people on the

Belle Amie with full breaches and everything. We had an amazing time at *The Boiler* and it was the best diving of the trip.

Early afternoon the Nautilus Explorer showed up at *The Boiler* and our captain decided to move the Belle Amie to the *El Cañon* site because of it. That turned out to be a dark, low visibility, murky soup with ripping currents. We all came back up empty handed and somewhat upset about the choice of the site and the dive itself. Given all the canceled and shortened dives on this trip, leaving *The Boiler* for *El Cañon* felt a bit like rubbing salt into an open wound to many divers.

After the diving was done we cleaned gear and got it all organized. After dinner we headed back to Cabo San Lucas for a 28 hour or so trip. We arrived Thursday close to midnight for a 9am disembarking on Friday.

In Summary

I had some fantastic dives, some good ones, some mediocre ones (as it often goes when you do a lot of dives), but this trip didn't come close to what I was sold. It was obvious that neither the ship nor the crew were ready for this trip. Over the days aboard the Belle Amie it became clear that several of the crew had arrived just a day or two earlier to run the ship. It was equally obvious that the dive crew had never worked together. They were figuring out how to run the dive operation for the 30 divers aboard as we went along and they had to rethink everything multiple times as skiffs started failing. These are all things



Manta ray at *The Boiler*, San Benedicto Island

I'm sure they'll figure out. The Nautilus has a long and solid record of running excellent live-aboard dive trips to the Socorro Islands and I'll have no problem booking with them again to go back another time. It is also definitely a worth while destination for big animal diving. Swimming with manta rays is a magical experience.

Despite daily frustrations, there were a few saving graces for this trip. All the passengers remained on their best behavior even as problems arose and dives got delayed, shortened or canceled. Criticism and complaints were voiced respectfully. We all rolled with the punches and tried to make the best of a bad situation so the atmosphere among the passengers stayed upbeat and positive. We enjoyed the dives we did get and nobody lingered on the shortened or canceled ones. The galley stayed operational during the entire trip with the chef producing great meals. That helped a lot too. And, finally, having said all of the above, the crew was made up of great people who all worked incredibly hard to salvage any part of this trip that was salvageable. Unfortunately they were put in an impossible position to crew aboard a ship that clearly was not ready to take passengers diving. Hopefully they'll straighten it out soon.

Upcoming Club Events

- First Saturday Of The Month: April 4, 2015
- Gear Exchange and Golf Ball Challenge: Saturday, May 16, 2015
- Monterey Camp & Dive Trip: July 9-13, 2015
- Underwater Photo Contest: TBD
- LA County Coast Beach Dive: TBD
- Pumpkin Carving Contest: TBD

Odds & Ends

Underwater Shooting for IMAX

Dive Photo Guide [interview with Michelle hall](#), one half of award-winning IMAX film production company [Howard Hall Productions](#).

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