

THE LIVEABOARD ISSUE

SCUBA

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REVIEWS EIGHT
NEW LIGHTS

P 25



CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO BOOK
THE DIVE YACHT OF YOUR DREAMS

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SIX HEALTH AND SAFETY QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING A LIVEABOARD

BY TRAVIS MARSHALL

It's been a hard year for dive travel—if you're like us, you're itching to get back in the swing. And a liveaboard charter may actually offer the best way to maximize your bottom time while minimizing health risks, since you'll be with the same group of divers for your entire trip.

As divers begin to venture back onto the reefs, here are six questions you should ask yourself to keep health and safety top of mind while planning a

liveaboard dive vacation.

Where should I go to minimize health risks?

Many divers are planning to start closer to home rather than travel to destinations that require multiple long flights.

"We're seeing a lot of interest in destinations that only require one flight, like the Caribbean from the U.S., or the Red Sea from Europe," says Wayne

Brown, CEO of Aggressor Adventures.

Kevin Purdy, sales marketing manager at All Star Liveaboards, says Bahamas trips on ships like *Aqua Cat* and *Cat Ppalu* are in highest demand. "The Bahamas is so close to the U.S. that you can travel the same day as boarding," he says, "which reduces the chance of exposure while traveling."

How are operators cleaning and sanitizing boats?

Frequent, comprehensive cleaning to help prevent the transmission of germs is the new normal on most liveaboards. "We're regularly cleaning and sanitizing shared spaces, high-touch surfaces, and rental gear," Purdy says. "We also sanitize dive bags before bringing them on board, and we've set up sanitation stations around the boats, along with signs reminding guests to regularly wash or sanitize their hands."

Brown says Aggressor Adventures

CHRISTIAN SKAUGE; OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: MANFRED BAIL; VICTORIA SHAPARENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

has established extensive new cleaning guidelines for all its boats, which include deep electrostatic cleaning of cabins between charters so divers can feel comfortable that their personal space on board is germ-free.

How can I maintain social distance on board?

On a liveaboard, you can't avoid sharing space with other divers, but it's still important to maintain social distance whenever possible.

"We can expect reduced maximum guest capacities to allow for some level of social distancing," says Emma Daffurn, content specialist for PADI Travel. You can also expect some changes to life on board, such as eating most meals outside, weather permitting.

"We now serve all meals buffet-style, but with crew in masks and gloves serving people rather than guests serving themselves," Purdy says. "We've also reduced our single supplement from 65 to 20 percent, so single divers don't have to share cabins with people they don't know."

What if I show symptoms of illness before my trip?

Booking a liveaboard trip means you're making a commitment to your fellow

divers that you'll do your part to avoid spreading illness on the boat. If you develop a cough, fever or any other symptoms, it's vitally important to postpone your trip. Liveaboard operators understand the importance of flexibility to ensure the health and safety of everyone on board. "No one wants to be forced into a situation that they feel is unsafe," Daffurn says. Many operators are offering greater flexibility in terms of cancellations and rebooking terms on trips in 2020; be sure to read the fine print on any offer or agreement.

How are divers protected from fires or other onboard emergencies?

After a liveaboard fire in the Red Sea, Aggressor Adventures responded by overhauling its onboard safety procedures. "We have implemented a mandatory 24-hour watch on all our boats, whether local guidelines require it or not, and we take all guests through our safety plan and show them all the emergency exits," Brown says. "Our crews also go through a safety checklist every hour, which includes unplugging any devices [like camera batteries] left to charge unattended, whether on the dive deck or the staterooms."

How can I prepare and protect myself for a potential emergency?

Before booking a trip, make sure you're comfortable with the safety measures on board by asking questions like: Are there working and tested smoke detectors on board? Will the crew keep a 24-hour watch? Does the boat have multiple evacuation routes and exits?

Once you arrive, pay attention to the safety briefing and make sure you know the evacuation plan for your cabin. Some divers recommend carrying a personal carbon monoxide [CO] detector. "CO detectors would be good for small engine or generator exhaust fume leaks, or CO from the galley or other sources," says Brian Harper, communications director at Divers Alert Network. However, a personal CO detector should not be considered an alternative to properly functioning smoke detectors installed throughout the boat.

Staff writer Alexandra Gillespie contributed to this report.

Ask Yourself



- 1 Is travel safe, responsible and permitted between my home and the destination?
- 2 Would a 14-day quarantine be required at the start or end of the trip? Would my work and family life accommodate that?
- 3 Would I want or need to get tested upon my return? Is that possible where I live?
- 4 Will business closures at my destination mean I need to bring extra supplies like hand sanitizer, snacks and water?
- 5 What health services are available at my destination? Does my medical insurance cover illness abroad, or will I need additional coverage?
- 6 What happens if I cannot fly home on my initially scheduled date because of a border closing or illness?
- 7 Am I comfortable renting dive gear, or should I plan to pack my own? If that means using a larger suitcase, am I comfortable going through baggage check-in and collection at the airport?

For additional travel questions and considerations, head to the Centers for Disease Control website: [cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus) and click on "Travel in the U.S." —Alexandra Gillespie





DIVING BACK IN

Experts weigh in on long-distance
travel in the COVID era

BY ALEXANDRA GILLESPIE

TOBIAS FRIEDRICH: OPPOSITE: SAM WORDLEY/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Most divers are opting to **#DiveLocal** right now, but some are still dreaming ahead.

People are already planning trips to far-flung waters in 2021 and 2022 thanks to “months of pent-up travel” demand, says Cameron Akins, vice president of Caradonna Adventures.

Coronavirus complicates a long-distance trip, which can be a hefty logistical lift even at the simplest of times. As divers begin planning that deferred trip, travel experts weigh in on how to prepare for the new world of travel.

ON LAND

Personal health, insurance coverage, coronavirus hotspots and constantly evolving travel restrictions should all be top of mind when considering a trip, travel professionals say. Before starting to research destinations, ask yourself—and consult your doctor—whether you are healthy enough to travel. Then research how shifting restrictions and coronavirus hotspots will shape your options.

Divers Alert Network (DAN) also suggests investigating the “risk mitigation practices” of local dive operators, like gear disinfection and access to medical care. Continue monitoring the situation as your trip approaches.

If you purchase travel or medical insurance, make sure to read the fine print to ensure it provides the coverage you want.

“One of the biggest changes we’re seeing is travel insurance plans,” says Wayne Brown, CEO of Aggressor Adventures. Sometimes travelers “buy travel insurance and think that’s going to pay for medical care and evacuation, which is not always the case.” And “a lot of ‘cancel-free’ policies now refund at 50 percent, and they make it clear that pandemics and viruses are not covered.”

Brian Harper, communications director at Divers Alert Network, says DAN is working with underwriters to adapt the coverage for DAN TravelAssist (evacuation coverage), dive accident insurance and DAN-sponsored trip insurance. “So far, exclusions for pandemics or other infectious diseases will be standard for the foreseeable future because we’ve been unable to find underwriters willing to take



the risk associated with the evacuation of infected persons during a pandemic or other outbreak of infectious disease,” he says. Starting in 2020, DAN plans to offer a “cancel for any reason” upgrade that will reimburse 75 percent of the non-refundable/non-reimbursable expenses of a canceled trip, with no pandemic exclusion. Even if you have purchased a policy before, take time to review it again.

IN AIR

Get ready to pack extra snacks, arrive at the airport early and sleep in your mask.

You’re going to see screenings like temperature checks before the flight, as well as social distancing from check-in to boarding, says Perry Flint, head of corporate communications for the Americas for the International Air Transport Association. Though precautions like temperature checks are fast, “it’s not a quick experience when there’s 1,000 people lined up,” he says. Build in time for it.

Masks are mandatory on flights at all times except when eating or drinking. Food service will continue on long international flights, says Flint, but many airlines are still searching for the right balance of providing amenities and limiting interactions. Bringing snacks and personal entertainment devices with you can further reduce interactions with staff.

Flint advises staying in contact with your airline for the most up-to-date information as it pertains to your trip. And, above all else, “do not travel when you feel sick.”

Freelancer Travis Marshall contributed to this report.

Safe Travel Resources

- 1 **COVID-19 FAQ SEARCH TOOL:** covid19.state.gov
- 2 **COVID-19 TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS AND CORONAVIRUS STATISTICS:** covid19.state.gov. Scroll down, click on “Travel Information and Alerts,” then click on the tab in the gray bar labeled “COVID-19 Country Specific Information.”
- 3 **REGISTER YOUR TRIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE SO YOU CAN BE CONTACTED AND ASSISTED DURING A CRISIS:** step.state.gov
- 4 **GENERAL TRAVEL ADVISORIES AND EMBASSY LOCATIONS:** <https://travelmaps.state.gov/TSGMap>
- 5 **CORONAVIRUS UPDATES FOR SCUBA DIVERS:** scubadiving.com/scuba-diving-coronavirus
- 6 **COUNTRY-LEVEL DIVING RESTRICTIONS:** travel.padi.com/scuba-diving-after-coronavirus-world-map
- 7 **CORONAVIRUS PRECAUTIONS AND HEALTH INFORMATION FOR DIVERS:** dan.org/covid-19

—Alexandra Gillespie

A vibrant underwater photograph featuring several hammerhead sharks swimming in clear blue water. Numerous small, bright orange fish are scattered throughout the scene, adding a dynamic and colorful element to the marine environment. The lighting is bright, suggesting a shallow depth.

A WORLD AWAY

Six Dive Locations Reachable Only by Liveaboard


BY MELISSA SMITH



From meeting new buddies from around the world to being able to get wet five times a day, liveaboard diving has plenty of perks. But one of the best benefits of a liveaboard is reaching areas of the ocean that are inaccessible by dayboat.

Out in the big blue, you never know what you'll encounter. Many of these far-flung destinations are part of marine protected areas little influenced by human activity. Their locations alone—isolated in the middle of major waterways—make them an attractive pit stop for migrating pelagic megafauna like sharks, rays and whales.

Granted, these are not always easy destinations to access. In fact, the most remote islands may take up to 36 hours to reach. But once you're anchored over your first dive site in a floating hotel hundreds of miles from civilization, you'll realize the travel was a small price to pay for the adventure that awaits.

A large hammerhead shark is the central focus, swimming horizontally across the frame. Its white underbelly and grey upper body are clearly visible. Several bright orange fish are swimming around it, and a yellow-striped fish is in the bottom left. The background is a deep blue ocean with many smaller fish and a coral reef at the bottom.

A liveaboard voyage
is the only way to
meet the hammers
of Cocos Island.



A giant sea fan (*Annella mollis*) at Tubbataha Reef. Opposite: Juvenile red-footed boobies at Darwin's Arch.

TUBBATAHA

PHILIPPINES



Tubbataha Reefs Natural Marine Park is made up

of two atolls dense with biodiversity that serve as nesting grounds for endangered turtles and more than 100 species of birds. Below, pristine reefs cover the seafloor. "Tubbataha is kind of a hidden gem," says Kevin Purdy, sales marketing manager of All Star Liveaboards. "The closest island is 100 miles away, so it's like a little oasis that draws in all kinds of marine life."

This UNESCO World Heritage Site might be your best bet to see whale sharks, manta rays, hawksbill turtles, hammerheads, spinner dolphins and schooling gray reef sharks all in one day.

"You get one of the higher concentrations of apex predators and megafauna in the world," Purdy says.

Large reef fish, guitar sharks and eagle rays fly through cleaning stations like Shark Airport and Delsan Wreck; frogfish, orangutan crabs, and other tiny critters wait at sites such as Asul Buhangin and Wall Street.

After a week in the Sulu Sea, you'll surely realize why Purdy says "everyone who dives Tubbataha just leaves in awe."

DIVERS GUIDE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 78 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit

WHAT TO WEAR A skin or 1 mm shorty; if you run cold, a 3 mm

AVERAGE VIZ 40 to 120 feet

WHEN TO GO March through June

OPERATORS

All Star Stella Maris, allstarliveaboards.com

All Star Infiniti, allstarliveaboards.com

Philippines Aggressor, aggressor.com

Philippine Siren, blueotwo.com



WOLF AND DARWIN ISLANDS

GALAPAGOS

➔ Diving the iconic Darwin's Arch is on the bucket list of many divers, but its remote location—some 200 miles northwest of the main islands of the Galapagos archipelago—means only those who travel by liveaboard will have the chance.

From the main island of Santa Cruz, it's an 18- to 24-hour boat ride to Darwin Island and

neighboring Wolf Island, depending on currents. But "the sheer abundance of life, the adrenaline of diving with schools of hammerheads, and the biodiversity" make the trek worth it, says Jennifer Cumming, Galapagos general manager for Explorer Ventures.

"Wolf and Darwin are the only islands in Galapagos deemed tropical, so they have a greater variety of corals and tropical fish species not found in the central or western islands," Cumming says.

What's more, at the right times of year, you're nearly guaranteed to see aggregating hammerhead sharks, spiraling schools of jacks, endemic marine iguanas,

occasional dolphin pods or whale sharks.

Landslide and Shark Bay are two popular sites at Wolf Island. Both are wall dives that feature large, shallow boulders frequented by Galapagos sharks and sea lions, Cumming says. Plus, the slope of the wall provides a great lookout point to take in the magnitude of the region's hammerhead schools.

Darwin Island, including the Darwin's Arch dive site, has natural "viewing platforms" where divers can post up and watch the show of megafauna and reef fish that makes this corner of the Enchanted Isles a magnet for divers across the globe.

DIVERS GUIDE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, but can drop into the 50s at depth

WHAT TO WEAR A drysuit or a 7 mm wetsuit, gloves and a hood

AVERAGE VIZ 75 to 100 feet

WHEN TO GO June to December

OPERATORS

Galapagos Aggressor III, aggressor.com

Galapagos Master, blueotwo.com

Galapagos Shark Diving, galapagossharkdiving.com

Galapagos Sky, galapagossky.com

Humboldt Explorer, explorer-ventures.com

Tiburón Explorer, explorer-ventures.com

HALLANIYAT ISLANDS

OMAN

➔ Twenty-five miles off the southeastern coast of Oman, the Hallaniyat Islands are a largely untouched playground for divers. Wrecks and reef sites are being discovered constantly, so no two liveaboard trips will be exactly alike. "Oman is such an amazing place," says Wayne Brown, CEO of Aggressor Adventures. "I've been diving all over the world, and I have never seen as much marine life as I did there on every dive."

After an eight-hour ride from the mainland city of Salalah, divers are welcomed to the Hallaniyats by hump-back whales, pods of spinner dolphins, mobula rays and green sea turtles—and those are just the creatures you may see from the surface. Comb the reefs of Hasikaya Coral Bay for shy octopuses, cute cuttlefish and flamboyant nudibranchs the size of your pinkie fingernail. The *City of Winchester*, the historic first shipwreck of World War I, has now become an artificial reef that attracts yellowfin barracuda, torpedo rays and swarms of mackerel. Take a ride down Fish Highway, a site at which "you go down and you're just surrounded by thousands and thousands of fish," Brown says. "It's amazing."

Brown also urges divers to experience Oman's culture: "The history is just incredible." And after all, if you're journeying all the way there, you may as well have a few days of exploration to bookend your dip in the Arabian Sea.

DIVERS GUIDE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 73 to 81 degrees Fahrenheit

WHAT TO WEAR Keep warm with at least a 5 mm suit, gloves and a hood, or a drysuit

AVERAGE VIZ 30 to 80 feet, depending on the season

WHEN TO GO Aggressor runs tours from November to April

OPERATOR

Oman Aggressor, aggressor.com



Oman's humpbacks
are unique: They are
resident, and thus
isolated from the
global population.



TOBIAS FRIEDRICH

SIMILAN AND SURIN ISLANDS

THAILAND

↓ Along with manta rays, whale sharks and reef-dwellers like scorpionfish and octopuses, the secluded Similan Islands—located about 40 miles off the west coast of Phang Nga, Thailand—provide a postcard-perfect vista that’s well worth the travel to get there.

Says Gilbert Redmann, owner of Sunrise Divers Phuket, “You’re cruising during sunset, watching the stars at night on the upper deck—really exploring something new.”

The archipelago’s establishment as a national park in 1982 has made its rocky landscapes and dive sites like Elephant Head and East of Eden a haven for critters big and small, from turtles and reef sharks to nudibranchs and ribbon eels.

About 60 miles north of the Similans lie the Surin Islands, home to the famed Richelieu Rock. Redmann says these destinations are often included in the same liveaboard itinerary, along with Koh Bon and Koh Tachai.

“Richelieu Rock is a remote dive site, but it’s probably the best dive site in Thailand,” Redmann says. “Because it’s remote, you have pelagics, you have big fish, you have schools of fish and you have healthy corals.”

The Surin Islands are protected

as well, as they’re part of Mu Ko Surin National Park. Thanks to Thai conservation efforts, both the Surin and Similan areas will remain prime liveaboard destinations for years to come.

DIVERS GUIDE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 79 to 84 degrees Fahrenheit

WHAT TO WEAR A shorty or full 3 mm suit should be comfortable for most divers, but some may only want a bathing suit

AVERAGE VIZ 65 to 100 feet

WHEN TO GO The national park is open November through April

OPERATORS

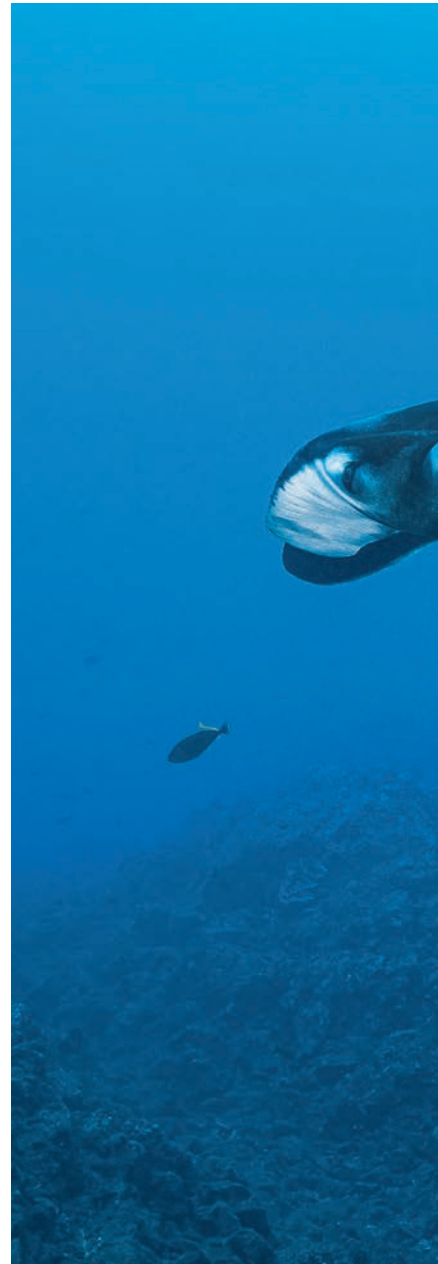
The Junk, blueotwo.com

The Phinisi, blueotwo.com

Sunrise Divers Phuket,

sunrise-divers.com

Thailand Aggressor, aggressor.com



REVILLAGIGEDOS

MEXICO

➔ Mexico’s Revillagigedo Islands are synonymous with liveaboards and big-animal encounters. The archipelago lies about 300 miles off the southern tip of Baja California, meaning a 24-hour sail is in order.

Four uninhabited volcanic islands make up the Revillagigedo



The Revillagigedos offer close encounters with the big stuff. Opposite: *Dendronephthya* soft corals at Thailand's Hin Duen.

JENNIFER PENNER; OPPOSITE: ALEX TYRRELL

dos: Socorro, Clarion, San Benedicto, and Roca Partida. They jut anywhere from 100 to 3,800 feet out of the water and extend to the seafloor, creating exceptional walls, pinnacles and sheer drop-offs that act as cleaning and feeding stations for oceanic mantas and half a dozen shark species, including mass aggregations of scalloped hammerheads.

"The Revillagigedos are part of a chain that goes all the way

through Cocos and the Galapagos, so you have all of these unique undersea volcanic mounds," Wayne Brown says. "Because of the remote nature, there's just not a lot of pressure on the sites."

Cabo Pierce, the Aquarium and El Canyon offer the chance to see just about any big animals you can imagine—humpback whales, pacific bottlenose dolphins, whale sharks, the list goes on.

Because these are important

waterways for endangered megafauna, the islands were deemed a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016, and a year later were established as the Revillagigedo National Park. "Even though they're remote, they're patrolled by the local government to prevent illegal fishing and harvesting."

DIVERS GUIDE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 70 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on

the season

WHAT TO WEAR For optimal comfort, bring a 5 mm or 7 mm wetsuit, or even a drysuit

AVERAGE VIZ 50 to 160 feet

WHEN TO GO

The park is open November to May; whales are present January to April

OPERATORS

Nautilus Explorer, nautiluslive.com

Rocio del Mar, rociodelmar.com

Socorro Aggressor, aggressor.com