

Blub Story

A Very Deep Experience

by Dave Barry

I'm swimming about 20 feet below the surface of the Atlantic, a major ocean. I'm a little nervous about this. For many years my philosophy has been that if God had wanted us to be beneath the surface of the ocean, He would never have put eels down there.

But I'm not panicking. That's the first thing you learn in SCUBA class: Don't panic! Just **DON'T DO IT!** Even if a giant eel comes right up and wraps around your neck and presses its face against your mask and opens its mouth and shows you its 874,000,000,000,000 needle-sharp teeth, you must remain **COMPLETELY CALM** so you'll remember your training and take the appropriate action, which in this case I suppose would be to poop in your wet suit. I don't know for certain, because in my training we haven't gotten to the section on eels.

Also, I am just now realizing, we haven't covered the procedure for what to do if a large tentacle featuring suckers the size of catchers' mitts comes snorking out and grabs your leg and starts hauling you into a vast, dark, hidden underwater cave whose denizens have little if any respect for the Bill of Rights.

Also there is the whole issue of shar... of sha... of sh...

There could be s___ks down here, somewhere.

But so far, all the marine life has appeared to be harmless. Mostly it has consisted of what I would describe, using ichthyological terminology, as "medium fish," many of which are swimming right up and giving me dopey fish looks, which basically translate to the following statement: "Food?" That's what fish do all the time -- they swim around going: "Food?" You can almost see the little question marks over their heads. The only other thought they seem capable of is: "Yikes!" Fish are not known for their SAT scores. This may be why they tend to do their thinking in large groups. You'll see a squadron of them coming toward you, their molecule-size brains working away on the problem ("Food?" "Food?" "Food?" "Food?"); and then you suddenly move your arm, triggering a Nuclear Fish Reaction ("Yikes!" "Yikes!" "Yikes!" "Yikes!") and *FWOOOSSHH* they're outta there, trailing a stream of exclamation marks.

This is a lot of fun to watch, because many of the fish are spectacularly, psychedelically beautiful. I'm sure there are all kinds of practical reasons for their coloration, but I don't want to know what these reasons are. I like to think that whoever designed marine life was thinking of it as basically an entertainment medium. That would explain some of the things down there, some of the unearthly biological *contraptions* you see hanging out in the nooks and crannies of the reef or contraptioning along the bottom on a ridiculous number of arms and legs with all kinds of feelers and pincers and eyeballs sticking out randomly on the ends of stalks.

It is a comical place, the sea.

So anyway, I'm swimming along the reef, with my nervousness gradually being replaced by a sort of high -- a combination of fascination and amusement -- when suddenly I hear my SCUBA instructor, Ray Lang, make the following statement: "Bmoogle." Everything anybody says through an air regulator underwater sounds like "Bmoogle," which can mean: "Hi!" Or: "Isn't this fun?" Or: "I'm having a coronary seizure!" So generally people communicate with hand signs.

When I look at Lang, he's pointing excitedly off to my right, so I turn and see a large ray, which looks sort of like a giant underwater bat. This is a major test of my ability to not panic. The only other time I've been in this kind of situation was in 1970 in the Virgin Islands, when I was snorkeling with a friend named Buzz behind a small, crowded dinghy, and a ray swam directly underneath us. I have never seen a missile launched from a submarine, but I can't imagine that it leaves the water at a higher velocity than Buzz and I attained as we vaulted, arms and legs flailing, into the lower atmosphere, creating a minor hazard for commercial aircraft before finally landing in the dinghy, which nearly sank.

And that was a smallish ray, compared to this one. This ray has enough square footage to qualify as a voting district. And it is very close, swooping along, flapping its enormous wings and going: "Food?" Instantly I wish that I had brought my Miami Herald identification card (which is laminated and would work underwater) so I could identify myself as a journalist. As it is, I have no choice but to strike what I believe to be a fairly inedible pose.

But the ray pays no attention to me. It just cruises by, very casual, very nonthreatening, a ray taking care of ray business. And as it passes by, I find myself, without really thinking about it, trying to *follow* it -- me, a weenie of legendary stature when it comes to dealing with the Animal Kingdom; a person who has on more than one occasion fled in desperate, armpit-soaking fear from *chickens* -- here I am, flippering through the blue-green Semi-Deep in pursuit of this nightmare-inducing *thing*.

Swimming next to me, Lang points toward the surface, up above the ray. I look, and there, silhouetted against the surface, is a large school of: barracuda. Yes! The ones with the teeth! In person! They're long and lean, looking very alert, all pointing in the same direction, as if awaiting orders from their commanding officer. ("OK, men. Today we're going to swim around and eat.")

But for some reason, the barracuda don't seem scary, any more than the ray does. For some reason, *none* of this seems scary. Even the idea of maybe encountering a smallish s___k doesn't seem altogether bad. It's beginning to dawn on me that all the fish and eels and crabs and shrimps and planktons who live and work down here are just too *busy* to be thinking about me. I'm a traveler from another dimension, not really a part of their already event-filled world, not programmed one way or another -- food or yikes -- into their instinct circuits. They have important matters to attend to, and they don't care whether I watch or not.

And so I watch.

Before I took lessons, virtually everything I knew about SCUBA -- aside from the fact that it stands for "self-contained underwater breathing apparatus" -- came from the

syndicated television series *Sea Hunt*. This was a very popular half-hour adventure show that ran from 1958 through 1961 and starred Lloyd Bridges as "Mike Nelson, free-lance undersea investigator."

There were 156 episodes of *Sea Hunt*, but they all merge together in my mind into one basic plot, namely: Mike Nelson is swimming around, conducting a free-lance underwater investigation when suddenly a bad guy swims up behind him and *cuts his air hose*. Mike always acted surprised about this, which was pretty funny because in fact he got his air hose cut about as often as the average person burps. You'd think it would have eventually dawned on him that for whatever reason -- possibly related to the Gulf Stream -- the waters around his boat were *teeming* with air-hose cutters, but old Mike never seemed to catch on.

So the climax of *Sea Hunt* was always an exiting underwater fight (accompanied by dramatic underwater horn music) in which Mike, his bubbles shooting all over the place, would struggle to get some air into his lungs and subdue the bad guy and get back to the surface and head over to the air-hose store, where he probably got a volume discount. *Sea Hunt* was great entertainment, but it did not leave you with the concepts of "SCUBA" and "safety" firmly cemented together in your mind.

The truth is, however, that SCUBA diving, especially at the relatively shallow depths recommended for recreational divers, is quite safe. Bad things can happen, but not nearly as many as can happen in a truly dangerous environment, such as the Palmetto Expressway. And virtually nothing bad is likely to happen unless you go out of your way to help it. So far, I'm pleased to report, I have not had my air hose cut one single time. I did have one terrifying Lobster Encounter (which I'll describe in harrowing detail later, when I feel you're ready to handle the emotional strain), but fortunately I was able to handle the situation through a combination of (a) not panicking and (b) letting go of the lobster. But I probably never would have thought of this without proper SCUBA training.

The training I got was the standard course authorized by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, or PADI. If you want to get into SCUBA diving, you should take an authorized course. For one thing, you'll learn many useful tips that will help to make your dive as enjoyable and fatality-free as possible. For another thing, if you don't have a card certifying that you've been properly trained, reputable dive shops will not rent you equipment or fill your tanks with air, which, as you can imagine, comes in very handy in the aquatic environment.

The guy who trained me, Ray Lang, 39, knows a lot about the aquatic environment. This is ironic because he was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, a locale you very rarely see featured on Jacques Cousteau underwater specials ("Henri excitedly gestures to Pierre that he has found a piece of the sunken tractor.") But in his early 20s he became obsessed with SCUBA diving and moved with his wife, Teresa, to South Florida, where they eventually opened a small chain of dive shops called Divers Den.

Lang's true passion, however, is competitive free-dive spearfishing, a moderately insane sport in which you wear only a mask and flippers -- no air tank -- and, holding your breath for two minutes or more, dive down as far as 100 feet, trying to locate, stalk and spear the largest possible fish without blacking out from oxygen deprivation and maybe getting hauled back to the surface, but maybe not, which has been known to happen. Lang and two other men won the 1988 national team free-dive spearfishing

championship; he also holds world spearfishing records for six species of fish, including three species of s___ks.

Lang has dived all over the world and had some fairly remarkable experiences, which he describes in a flat, Midwestern-style twang, often employing unconventional but surprising useful words such as "motate," as in:

"... so I look up, and I see I'm about to swim directly into this *large* tiger shark, has to be 15 feet, and I think, whoa, time to motate out of here, so"

Or:

"... so I figure, how hard can it be to catch one of these things? So I grab it, and I'm trying to motate on out of there, but it gets one tentacle wrapped around a rock, and now it has hold of *me*, and I mean those thing can develop some *suction*, so I'm thinking, whoa"

I should stress here that this type of anecdote does **NOT** form the basis of the diving-course curriculum. When you take the course, you start out with some classroom sessions wherein you learn basic diving theory, including a lot of information concerning how Pressure relates to Volume. This is of course exactly the kind of thing that put you to sleep in high school, but you find yourself paying very close attention in SCUBA class, once you realize that the volume they're talking about is the air in your own personal lungs, and that if you take a deep breath from your tank at a depth of, say, 40 feet, and then, while holding your breath, you shoot, missile-style, to the surface, your little air sacs could start exploding like defective condoms, a situation which, as Lang put it, can be "very fatal."

Fortunately, there is a very simple preventive measure: All you have to do is *keep breathing*. That's it. You'd think there'd be no way you could forget it. But it turns out that's the biggest danger you face underwater -- not eels or s___ks, but the failure to perform an act so simple and natural that you have presumably been doing it on a routine basis since early childhood. Yet it was stressed so heavily in SCUBA training that I found myself writing it repeatedly in my notes, as if it were some kind of radical new science breakthrough. "**IMPORTANT TO KEEP BREATHING**," I would write. And: "**NEVER STOP BREATHING!**"

The highlight of the classroom training, for me, was when we learned about the equipment (or, as we SCUBA veterans say, the "gear"). Your basic diving outfit is a mask and flippers, plus the breathing apparatus, which you can rent. But there are all kinds of other neat gear objects you can get, the neatest one, as far as I'm concerned, being: a knife. All my life I've wanted an excuse to wear a knife, and here I have found a sport where it is actually *encouraged*. "Diving knives are practical tools," states the PADI course manual, "providing you with a means to measure, pry, dig, cut and pound under water..." But the **REAL** advantage, which the manual fails to note, is that you can wear your knife *strapped to your leg*.

There's something about striding around with a knife strapped to your leg that makes you feel exceedingly James Bondlike. If you can keep a little secret, I will confess to you that right at this very moment, as I write these words, I have my knife strapped on. Just in case somebody comes along and, for example, tries to cut my word processor cord. As

Ray Lang put it, during one of his colorful diving anecdotes: "You never can tell when the inevitable is gonna happen."

Speaking of the inevitable, there comes a time in your SCUBA training when you leave the classroom and get into some actual water, usually in the form of a swimming pool. This was where I encountered my first major diving challenge, namely, putting on the wet suit. The wet suit does an excellent job of protecting you and keeping you warm even in cold water, but putting it on for the first time is like trying to get into a giant foundation garment that has been possessed by an evil spirit. You wind up lying idiotically on your back, legs in the air, tugging and straining at this malevolent piece of rubber, fearful that if you let go, it will leap to its invisible feet and start dancing around you, laughing silently and making invisible but unmistakable hand gestures.

My first SCUBA exercise was equally exciting. Lang and I were standing in about five feet of water, and all he wanted me to do was kneel on the bottom. That was it. So, bearing firmly in mind the Two First Rules of Scuba Diving -- Don't Panic and Never Stop Breathing -- I put my air regulator in my mouth, ducked my head under water and immediately, with a natural effortlessness that suggested I had been doing these things all my life, I (1) panicked and (2) stopped breathing. My feet started inexplicably drifting upward of their own accord, my mask started filling with water, I started choking and flailing my arms ineffectually around and the lone thought I could summon into my brain was: "Yikes!"

So I thrashed my way back to the surface, a failure. If you want to feel like a complete dweezil, the best way I know to accomplish this is to stand in front of a guy who has swum down into the depths with no air tank and speared a 10-foot hammerhead, and explain to this guy why you seem to be unable to accomplish the mission of kneeling on the bottom of a swimming pool in five feet of water.

But Lang, who's used to this, was patient, and before long I was motating around the pool like a regular frogperson, making all kinds of astounding underwater discoveries. When you consider that approximately 0.000000000003 percent of our planet is covered with swimming pools, it's shocking how little we really know what goes on beneath the surface of these mysterious bodies of water. It turns out that there's a whole world down there: cracks, leaves, the occasional dead worm and -- for those with the courage and skill to challenge the deep end -- a drain.

In between my groundbreaking exploration, Lang had me practice various skills, such as removing my mask and air regulator underwater, then getting them back into place. This is not difficult if you simply remember what you were taught, although at first your instinct is to yell, "Time out!" and make all the water go away while you get yourself straightened out, which of course would not be a practical solution if you were 50 feet down.

Another skill I learned, I'm pleased to note, is "buddy breathing," which is when two divers share one air tank because one of them has run out of air or had his hose cut. I had no trouble with this skill because I had seen it so many times on *Sea Hunt*. As Lang and I swam along the pool bottom, passing the regulator back and forth, I could almost hear dramatic horn music.

But the true drama came the day I dove in the ocean. We went to the John Pennekamp State Park/Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary complex, which is one of the world's

most popular dive sites because of its spectacular and accessible reefs. These are made up of several jillion living and deceased little creatures called "polyps," whom we might think of collectively as nature's own enormous halftime marching band because of their ability to form themselves into amazing formations. The reefs, and almost all the life forms that thrive on and around them, are protected by strict laws, as Lang explained to me in detail before we went out.

"You may not spear or possess any snook," he informed me. Frankly this had never crossed my mind, but I wrote it down anyway, because the last thing you'd want to do is to wind up in prison and have the other inmates ask you what you were in for, and you'd have to answer: "snook possession."

Lang said I could take a lobster if I found one big enough, but I figured there was no chance of this. I hate lobsters. As far as I'm concerned, lobsters are large underwater insects. I don't like to be in the same *restaurant* with them. Unfortunately, I failed to mention this to Lang.

(Sound of horn music starting to play quietly but dramatically in the background.)

I will spare you a gushy description of the dive itself, except to say that when you finally see what goes on underwater, you realize that you've been missing the whole *point* of the ocean. Staying on the surface all the time is like going to the circus and staring at the outside of the tent. At first Lang had me practicing my SCUBA skills, but after that I basically just motated along, very relaxed, grooving on the scenery, the fish, the comical marine contraptions. Even the giant ray, even the barracuda, merely served to heighten my enjoyment. The whole thing was going perfectly.

A little *too* perfectly.

(The horn music gets louder.)

OK. So I'm swimming along, and suddenly Lang gestures to me to swim down to where he's crouched in the sand, next to a coral ledge. He is pointing to something, but I can't see what it is. Suddenly his hand flashes out.

(Very loud music now.)

And now Lang is thrusting something into my hand, and it is, as you have deduced, the dreaded Big Bug of the Deep. And I am *holding* it. And it is gesturing violently with all 758 legs, clearly conveying the underwater message: "**HEY!** Let **GO**, dammit!!" Which of course I do. Instantly the lobster motates at very high velocity in reverse gear back under the ledge, causing bmoogles of chagrin to erupt from various watching divers, who were hoping to *eat* it.

Perverts.

That was the only upsetting thing that happened. Although I did see an eel. This happened near the end of the last dive; I was following Lang back to the boat, and as he went by a cave, he casually gestured for me to look inside. I did, and there, maybe 10 feet away, was Mr. Moray.

I looked at Lang, and held my arms way apart, the international diver gesture, for, "Hey! This is a **BIG** eel! Right?"

Lang shrugged, the international gesture for, "Nah. Maybe six feet," he told me later. Nothing to gesture home about.

But I am here to tell you that this is one bad-looking creature. You could barely see his body -- just his whitish head, hanging there, mouth open, a grinning skull floating in the gloom. Not that *I*, personally, was nervous. It takes more than a moray to scare a man who has made a lobster back down.

Now Lang is drifting in front of me. He makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger, the sign for, "OK?"

I make the OK sign back. But that isn't enough, not for what I'm feeling -- the adrenaline, the elation, the high. This is *way* more than merely OK.

"Bmoogle," I inform him. It comes from the heart.