

BUBBLING OVER 2011

At least one unforgettable diving holiday is lined up for everyone in 2011 – the one you select depends on the sort of diver you are. **PIPPA JACKS** is both a diver and a travel press specialist, so we asked her for some suggestions. Illustrations by **CLIVE HADWEN**



THE DEEP-POCKETED

Divers who like to have something special to brag about when they get back from their holidays need look no further than these three jaw-dropping diving experiences:

NECKER NYMPH: From aeroplanes and hot-air balloons to luxury yachts and spacecraft, there are few vehicles Sir Richard Branson does not

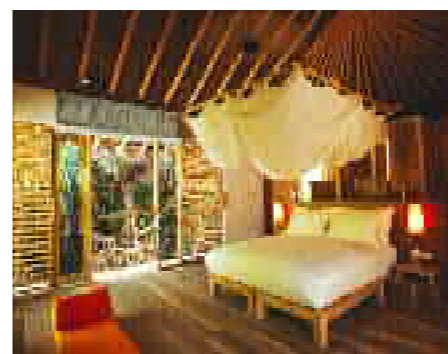
own. His latest toy is a three-man submarine called *Necker Nymph*, based at his private island (Necker) in the British Virgin Islands. The “dive pilot” and two passengers are strapped into the open cockpit, which has scuba-gear built in. The sub can go as deep as the passengers’ diving qualifications allow, though with a floor of 40m. You pay US \$15,000 to use the sub for a week (come on, \$5000 each!) and it’s available for guests only. Individual rooms on Necker can be booked during certain periods, prices from \$26,495 per couple for a week all-inclusive. Or why not hire the entire island from \$53,000 per week? www.neckerisland.virgin.com

POLE POSITION: Taking ice-diving to a new



ARCTIC DIRECT AND THE ACDC

extreme is specialist operator Arctic Direct, which has launched a mind-blowing expedition to dive at the North Pole. The eight-day trip begins in Oslo, from where participants fly to Spitsbergen, then to Barneo airfield close to the North Pole itself. After pitching camp, there are three days of diving beneath Arctic ice, where visibility can be as good as 70m, we’re told. Participants must attend a training camp in the White Sea in Russia in February or March. Here they can gain their PADI Ice Diver qualification if they don’t already have it. The expedition takes place in April and costs around 40,000 euros per person, including the White Sea training, exact date and price to be confirmed. www.arcticdirect.co.uk



INDONESIAN GEMS: If you want a truly bespoke liveaboard experience – and your wallet can stand the price-tag – consider a tailor-made luxury package in Indonesia’s Flores Sea. Recently launched operator Dive In Style recommends starting with two nights at the five-star Amanwana resort, where guests stay in huge “luxury tents” with hardwood floors. Then take a five-day private cruise to the islands of Komodo on the new Amanikan yacht – a three-cabin luxury cruiser with dive equipment for up to six guests, and a full crew with dive instructor. Stop to dive wherever you like as you pass through Komodo National Park, where you might glimpse rare mimic octopuses and warmwater killer whales en route to Rinca and Komodo itself, home to the infamous dragons. A seven-night tailor-made trip costs from £5200 per person full board, including flights and 12 dives, when the boat is shared by six. www.diveinstyle.com

PIONEERS



There’s a certain thrill in knowing that you’re one of very few divers with a certain dive site in your log-book. Conquer these lesser-known destinations next year – before anyone else at your dive club does:

EL DORADO: The diversity of Colombia’s diving has remained largely undiscovered by the UK market, but with air links much improved last year – and perceptions about the South American country’s

reputation for crime and violence being challenged – this could be set to change. With warm, easy diving in the Caribbean Sea and more adventurous dives along its Pacific coast, the country offers something for every level of diver. Highlights include the cays between the Caribbean islands of San Andres and Providencia; Gorgona Island, known for its humpback whales



from July to October, and where many scientists live and work; and the tiny rock of Malpelo, 350 miles off the Pacific coast, which is described as a “natural laboratory”. www.colombia.travel

SOUTHERN COOL: Be one of only 12 passengers aboard Waterproof Expeditions’ trip to Antarctica in February. Divers will have the chance to dive with and photograph the elusive leopard seal, with guidance from professional photographer Amos Nachoum. Other highlights at this time of year include penguin chicks taking to the water for the first time. Passengers board the 15-day expedition at Ushuaia in Argentina, and should already have drysuit experience. Prices are from 18,500 euros per person. Other Waterproof Expeditions this year include Arctic cruises to Spitsbergen, Greenland and Iceland, and a beluga whale-watching expedition to Russia’s White Sea. www.waterproofexpeditions.com

MAN OR NATURE? Tour operator InsideJapan recommends the small sub-tropical island of Yonaguni, part of the Yaeyama chain, as an



OCVB - YONAGUNI

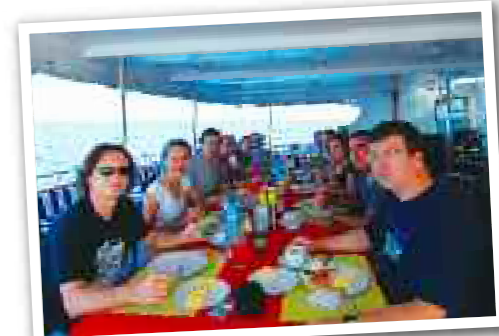
exciting option for those looking to try somewhere out of the ordinary in 2011. Yonaguni Iseki – a mysterious system of huge stone structures – lies 25m below the surface, although experts can’t agree whether the stones are the ruins of an ancient Okinawan castle or naturally-occurring formations. Go between November and May for the best chance of seeing hammerheads. InsideJapan Tours can tailor-make

a nine-night trip combining Yonaguni, nearby Ishigaki (a breeding area for manta rays) and three nights in Tokyo from £1869 per person, including 12 dives and most meals, but excluding flights. www.insidejapantours.com

THE BENEVOLENT BUNCH

Not content with enjoying the underwater world as bystanders, benevolent divers like to spend their holidays helping to preserve it. Check out these exciting give-back projects for 2011:

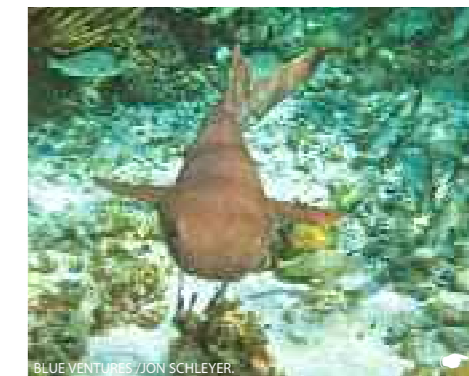
COUNTING FISH: Biosphere Expeditions is setting up a new project in the Maldives for September. Up to 15 dive volunteers will spend six nights on a four-deck liveaboard, carrying out sea-bed surveys to record which corals, fish and invertebrates are present. Volunteers will also be asked to record any whale shark sightings, and to take underwater photos of the sharks’



BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS

unique gill markings for identification. Prices are from £1480 excluding flights, and volunteers can become fully certified Reef Check EcoDivers. www.biosphere-expeditions.org/maldives

MINDING THE BARRIER: A project on the Belize Barrier Reef – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – is the latest from Blue Ventures. Based at Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve in northern Belize, it gives divers the chance to collect data on fish and coral species in uncharted areas, as well as monitoring nearby seagrass and mangrove habitats and helping at a manatee rehabilitation centre. Prices are from £1600 for three weeks if volunteers are



BLUE VENTURES / JOIN SCHLEYER

already PADI Advanced qualified or higher, or from £1800 for those needing training. There are departure dates most months in 2011. www.blueventures.org

ON THE BALL: A new "Reef Ball" project has been completed, with the help of volunteers, off the volcanic Caribbean island of Montserrat. Construction of a new town at Little Bay had meant that the existing reef would be destroyed, so the Montserrat Reef Project was set up through the tourist board to create an artificial reef out of moulded concrete. Corals were then propagated from the existing reef and transplanted onto the new reef structures, further down the coast. For 2011, the project is looking for more volunteers to help survey and monitor the new reef's progress, www.montserratreefproject.com. Scuba Montserrat Dive Shop has seven-night packages combining accommodation, diving and various excursions and tours from US \$1096 per person between January and August. www.scubamontserrat.com



MATTHEW OLDFIELD

also visits the marine reserve of Poor Knights Islands – the celebrated volcanic group offering drop-offs, walls, caves and tunnels, and home to 125 species of fish. The five-day package includes some meals, four nights' accommodation (in two different locations) and six dives. It is priced from NZ \$1200 per person (around £590). www.divethefive.co.nz

KEYS AND PASSPORT: The Florida Keys Shipwreck Heritage Trail, comprising nine historic wrecks dating as far back as the 1700s as well as several purpose-sunk vessels, is a wreck-head's paradise. So it was only a matter of time before the marketeers dreamed up a way of making it competitive. The Wreck Trek Passport programme began last year, challenging divers to log the following nine wrecks in a passport-style log-book: *Spiegel Grove, Duane, Bibb, Eagle, Thunderbolt, Adolphus Busch Sr., Cayman Salvager, Joe's Tug* and the *Vandenberg*, sunk only in 2009. Dive five by the end of the year to earn a commemorative certificate; dive all nine and you'll enter a draw to win dive equipment and free dive-and-stay packages in Florida Keys.



STEPHEN FRINK/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

Florida Keys Dive Centre recommends staying at Ocean Pointe Suite with rooms at US \$109 per night, and offers two dives from \$79. www.floridakeysdivectr.com

SNAPPERS

Underwater photography enthusiasts – who no doubt asked Santa for some fancy new kit this Christmas – might like to check out these camera-friendly opportunities:

BRING YOUR OWN CAMERA: If you're already fairly handy with your camera – and like the sound of Malaysia in July – check out the Layang Layang Digital Photo Shootout. Back in

2011 after a gap of two years, the contest has photography equipment worth US \$30,000 up for grabs, as well as dive trips to exotic locations. The remote Layang Layang atoll is 190 miles off the north-east coast of Sabah and is known for its wall diving, with drop-offs of up to 2000m, and its scalloped



hammerhead sharks. The event is hosted at Layang Layang Island Resort, with a package of six nights' accommodation and 10 dives costing US \$1000. There are only two categories – wide and macro – and professional photographer judges will be giving out tips during the competition. www.avillionlayanglayang.com

YOUR HIGHLIGHTS: Eco Divers in Indonesia has appointed Scubazoo and photographer Christian Loader to manage its new Digital Centres at Kima Bajo Resort & Spa and Lembeh Cottages, describing the venture as the only dedicated photo and video centre in North Sulawesi. Bringing in-house Scubazoo, said to be South-east Asia's leading underwater filming and photography company, Eco-Divers expects to attract more people who want to learn from "true professionals". The centres will provide services



WRECK NUTS



Nothing excites these divers more than a chunk of rusty metal on the seabed, waiting to be explored. Here are three suggestions for 2011:

KITTIWAKE – AT LAST: After a lengthy delay, and seven years of planning, USS *Kittiwake* was finally due to be sunk in the Cayman Islands in December. The 76m US submarine-rescue vehicle, saved from the scrapheap, should by now be lying off Grand Cayman's Seven Mile Beach – part of a private park, divers will be charged an entry fee of \$10. Dive Worldwide is offering eight nights at Compass Point on Grand Cayman from £1759 per person (two sharing). The package includes 12 dives, flights from the UK and car rental. www.diveworldwide.com

DIVE THE FIVE: Kiwi operator Dive! Tutukaka has devised a new "Dive The Five" programme for 2011, which takes in four of the best wreck dives in New Zealand. They include the 113m frigate HMNZS *Canterbury*, sunk in 2007, which stands completely upright, and the *Waikato* frigate, sunk in 2000, along with the 64m *Tui*, sunk in 1999, and the *Rainbow Warrior*, the 40m trawler originally used by Greenpeace. Number five? The package



including daily diving and "highlights" DVDs, with 20-30 minutes of edited video of your best diving moments plus 20 minutes of the best footage of Bunaken/Lembeh, all edited to music, for US \$120; personal filming; guest-diver photography; more underwater videography and photography courses; camera rental (with a D200 in Nexus housing with flashguns) and image-downloading. www.eco-divers.com

SHALLOW END: For an introduction to underwater photography, the Red Sea is the perfect location. Longwood Holidays operates a workshop in Nuweiba designed for divers with compact cameras, run by well-known instructor Maria Munn. Maria has devised courses for Canon, Fuji, Sony, Nikon and Olympus compact cameras and launched PADI's Digital Underwater Photographer course. The seven-night trip departs on 20 June and costs £950 per person, based on two sharing a twin-room at the all-inclusive Hilton Nuweiba Coral Resort. The package includes flights and six days of diving. www.longwoodholidays.co.uk

TEK-HEADS

If going deeper and staying longer floats your boat, try these technical dives in 2011:

NORTHERN SHIFT: Red Sea specialist Tekstreme, technical arm of Emperor Divers, has changed its northern technical safari route for 2011. The itinerary will now include the reefs of Tiran, giving divers access to Thomas Canyon and the wreck of the *Lara*. Though the rusted frame of the *Lara* is still above the surface, other sections and a mast lie between 40 and 85m. A seven-day Northern Tech Safari departs from Hurghada on 25 February, priced at 1215 euros. The trip will take in other deep-lying wrecks such as the *Rosalie Moller* (30-50m), *Al Qamar* ferry (60-85m), the *Gulf Fleet 31* (85-100m) and the deep wall drift dive on Small Giftun Island. Divers must have a technical qualification, and custom gases can be mixed onboard. www.tekstremediving.com

RIVIERA BREAK: The southern coast of France is a new destination for Dive Worldwide this year, and handy for long weekends, with diving near Cannes, Cap d'Antibes, La Fourmigue and more.

One of the attractions for more advanced divers is the wreck of the *Rubis*, a French mine-laying submarine from WW2 that lies in 60m. Divers will be assessed before a visit to this dive site is arranged. Five-day mini-breaks cost from £499 per person (land arrangements only), including six dives over three days, and four nights' accommodation. Nice airport is nine miles from the accommodation. www.diveworldwide.com

CAMEL-STYLE: Camel Dive Club & Hotel in Sharm el Sheikh, apart from boasting Egypt's best-known dive bar, also now caters for technical divers looking to ply their craft in the Red Sea. If you thought you knew the sites of the Straits of Tiran, Ras Mohammed and the *Thistlegorm* from recreational



ANDREW SLATER WWW.CAMELDIVE.COM

dives in the past, get a deeper perspective through boat dives guided by technical divers. A day of either extended-range (up to 55m) or trimix dives (up to 100m) costs 80 euros if booked in advance, and equipment is available for rental. Camel also offers tekkie diving in Dahab as a day-trip. If you're just breaking into more advanced diving, Camel covers the range of TDI and PADI TecRec courses. It is also a rebreather-friendly dive centre, allowing for the longer dive times required on recreational trips, welcoming rebreather divers on its guided technical diving excursions and providing gas fills. www.cameldive.com

LEARNERS

If 2011 is the year in which you, a friend or a family-member takes the plunge and becomes a qualified diver, here are some good-value ways in which to do it:

RED SEA VALUE: Entry-level courses in the Red Sea are usually good value, especially if learning with a friend or partner. Werner Lau, which runs

two resorts in Egypt, has some wallet-friendly deals on bookings made by 2 March. Book any dive course (or dive package) at Heinan Marina Resort in Sharm el Sheikh and the second diver can have the same course or package free of charge. This means you get two PADI Open Water courses for 290 euros. At the Oasis in Marsa Alam, your buddy gets 50% off. With both resorts, the offer is limited to stays taken between 10 January and 15 March, when prebooked online. www.wernerlau.com

DIVING AT DAWN: Dawn Diving in Malta plans to have a new dive centre ready in time for the 2011 season. Claiming to be one of the most experienced dive centres in the Mediterranean, it will offer PADI and PADI Technical courses,EFR First Aid and even Disabled Diver courses all up to instructor level. Entry-level courses may be more expensive in Malta than Egypt, but the dive centre can arrange a self-catering hotel from as little as 200 euros for 14 days for three people. PADI's Open Water Diver course, over three and a half days, is priced at 350 euros, plus 50 euros for the manual. www.dawndiving.com

WORKING HOLIDAY: Taking the theory part of a diving course before you travel means that you don't have to spend half your holiday with your nose in a textbook. With PADI's OWD course, you can learn online for around £90 (www.padi.com), then complete the pool sessions and four open-water dives needed to gain certification when on holiday. The all-inclusive LaSource resort in Grenada includes three free dives in a seven-night stay for certified divers, and now the resort has committed to scheduling PADI qualifying



dives at the very start of a week-long stay, so that guests can still take advantage of these three "free" dives. Tropical Sky Scuba Diving has a seven-night stay at LaSource from £1779 per person, including flights and three dives for certified divers. It costs £250 to complete all practical elements of the course there. www.holidays4scubadiving.co.uk

LIVEBOARD LOVERS



For some divers, only the freedom of waking up at a new dive site each sunrise – and enjoying a cool drink on deck each sunset – will do:

DIVE SYSTEMS: Malta gained what is said to be its first liveaboard last year, a former Italian Coastguard vessel converted by Dive Systems, and renamed *Grecale*. The operator offers three or six-day itineraries for up to 10 divers, in four cabins. As well as the famed dive sites of Malta and Gozo, *Grecale* has taken trips to Lampedusa, Linosa and Lampione – Italian islands between Malta and Tunisia. On its maiden voyage, new military vessels and tanks were reportedly discovered, and the Dive Systems team are now in the process of identifying them. Prices are from 654 euros per person (based on 10 divers) for a three-day, full-board trip with nine dives. www.divesystemsmalta.com



J BANTIN

MALDIVES SIREN: Worldwide Dive and Sail starts operating permanently in the Maldives from July, when it sails its original yacht there and renames her *Maldives Siren*. The liveaboard will offer four distinct 10-night itineraries designed to take into account the monsoon seasons and the best diving available, from the far north to the deep south. Prices will start from 2400 euros. Replacing the *Maldives Siren* will be the *Oriental Siren*, which starts operations out of Thailand in the Andaman Sea in November – unlike other vessels in the Siren fleet, this is a junk-style yacht. www.worldwidediveandsail.com

BIG STUFF: Tropical Sky Scuba Diving has teamed up with Mike Ball Dive expeditions in Australia to offer three, four and seven-night liveaboards on the Great Barrier Reef. Most itineraries head north to Cod Hole, and include lots of shark and whale opportunities, with chances to watch shark-feeding in the Coral Sea. Dedicated minke whale and great white shark expeditions are also offered. A package with flights from the UK to Cairns and a seven-day Coral Sea Safari aboard *Spoilsport* costs from £1729 per person. All meals and snacks, a PADI Reef Ecology course and up to 27 dives on a seven-day trip are included. Nitrox is available for a further Au \$150 for the trip. www.holidays4scubadiving.co.uk

GREEN DIVERS

Eco-aware divers not only want to minimise their impact on the underwater world, but to stay somewhere eco-friendly too. Dive with a clearer conscience at these resorts:

AFTER THE CUP: World Cup fever thrust South Africa into the spotlight in 2010, but divers can take advantage of the new tourist infrastructure and extra airline routes left in the football fans' wake. Thonga Beach Lodge, on the Maputuland

coast of KwaZulu-Natal, lies within Isimangaliso Wetland Park and is close to Mabibi, one of the best tropical dive sites in South Africa. The eco-friendly lodge is made up of 24 thatched suites, and is involved in several conservation projects in the surrounding area. The local community is heavily involved in the lodge, and it works in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund and the Wildlands Trust. Prices are from 2900 rand per person per night May to August in a forest-view room (around £260); with dives around £35 each. Go November to February for turtle egg-laying season; or June to September for raggedtooth shark mating season (further down the coast). www.isibindi.co.za

NATURALLY COOL: Mozambique is a new destination for Regaldiver in 2011, and divers can stay at Nuarro Eco Lodge on Memba Bay in northern Mozambique, built by local





people using sustainable and locally sourced materials. It offers 12 luxurious beachfront chalets, constructed using traditional methods which, they say, means they don't need air-conditioning, and they are filled with handcrafted furniture. Shore dives and boat dives within Memba Bay are just minutes away, while the wall dives of Baixo do Pinda are a 25-60-minute boat-ride. Between July and November, divers could hear humpback whales as first the females come to give birth, then the males arrive for mating. Regaldive offers a week at the Nuarro Eco Lodge from £2695, including flights (two sharing). Diving costs from £329 (includes three days' boat diving, one night dive and unlimited shore diving). www.regal-diving.co.uk

The resort is built on stilts to minimise impact on the surrounding habitats, and is currently reforesting the area with native species. Pools are filled with saltwater as opposed to fresh, and the resort grows much of its own herbs and vegetables on site. Diving is offered through Ocean Experience Limited and focuses on the little-dived north coast region of Tobago from Amos Vale to Sisters, where hammerhead sharks may appear during winter. Rates at the hotel are from US \$135 per double room per night. Diving costs from \$45 per dive. www.footprintseco-resort.com

SINGLES

CARIBBEAN CLAIMS: Tobago's sustainable Footprints Eco Resort and Spa on Culloden Bay recently reopened after a refurbishment project.

Whether you're a perpetual bachelor or bachelorette, or simply a diver with a vehemently

anti-diving partner, these trips are designed to satisfy the needs of those travelling alone:

DOUBLING UP IN GRENADA: Singles weeks in Grenada are new this year from Regaldive. Departing 22 June and 21 September, the Solos Divers Weeks cost from £1399 per person, including B&B accommodation at True Blue Bay Resort, sharing with one other diver, 10 dives and flights. If your snoring is particularly loud and you're a considerate person, you can pay a £345 supplement to have your own room. Diving attractions include the wreck of *Bianca C*, the liner wreck that "celebrates" the 50 anniversary of its demise this year, and Jason de Caires Taylor's underwater sculpture garden at Moliniere Bay. www.regal-diving.co.uk

MAGIC PROPOSITION: Ultimate Diving has launched a singles holiday to the Magic Island Resort in the Philippines. This location is based on the bay in Moalboal, and you'll have the luxury of a 50m wall, no less, as the house reef. The aim is to bring together like-minded divers at a friendly resort, and with flights, seven nights' half-board and 10 guided dives, you pay from £1199 if prepared to share the cottage (£100 more if you opt for single occupation). www.ultimatediving.co.uk

SOLO IN DAHAB: A singles week in the Red Sea with Longwood Holidays would appear to be more affordable than some. As well as Solo Weeks for Beginners, there are Solo Weeks for Qualified Divers, with departure dates from 27 January and once a month thereafter. Divers get their own room with balcony or terrace at Bedouin Moon in Dahab, and dive at Reef 2000. You can enjoy the challenges of the Blue Hole and the many other dive sites that cater for all standards of diver there. A seven-night package for qualified divers costs from £643, including 10 shore dives. www.longwoodholidays.co.uk 

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