



Last month's column dealt with extreme currents in a cave – now we turn to strong flows in open water. MIKE BERNHARDT is an award-winning writer who lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his wife Yvonne – and the couple were somewhat taken by surprise recently while diving in Raja Ampat!

'All we have to do is breathe and have fun!'

EXPERIENCED DIVERS dream of visiting Raja Ampat, off the coast of West Papua, Indonesia. But my wife Yvonne and I were most certainly not experienced when we embarked on a 12-day liveaboard trip there recently.

We had only about 40 dives between us, the most recent six years ago. We could have gone to Belize, but if we were going to spend the money anyway, why not go for the best diving on Earth? They'll help us into our BCs and take care of us, I thought. All we have to do is breathe and have fun. What could go wrong?

Most of the other 10 passengers had been diving forever. One said, incredulously: "You two have guts. Most people don't come here until they've done hundreds of dives." Did I detect a note of disdain?

Our naive confidence soon melted into a puddle of concern as the veterans exchanged war stories.

"The last time I was here, I was the only one who didn't get an ear infection from all the plankton and bacteria in the water. I told them to put vinegar or peroxide in their ears every day, but they didn't listen. They couldn't dive at all the last four days."

"It was a pretty wild drift-dive. One lady got out of control and was doing somersaults while the current carried her out to open sea. She was pretty shaken up."

Wild currents that make you turn somersaults? Critters infecting our ears? Why didn't our dive-shop mention this stuff when we asked what to bring? Because the owner had never been to Raja Ampat. We hadn't looked elsewhere for information; we didn't know we needed to.

YVONNE MADE A LIST of items we should have brought: current-hook, muck-stick, peroxide, whistle, squeaker, SMB, dive-socks, a long list of prescription medications. Oh, and fins that wouldn't give us blisters.

But from the first dive, we knew we'd made the right decision in coming.

Yvonne and I have dived in Hawaii, Fiji and Bora Bora. Raja Ampat was on a scale of wonder all its own. Endless varieties of hard and soft coral swayed or bathed in the bluish-green light. Cute-faced clownfish darted in and out of bubbletip anemones.

Camouflaged pygmy seahorses hid in fan corals, visible only when our divemaster Sadat pointed them out to us.

Wrasse, damselfish and fusiliers, some in schools of thousands, were everywhere, flying this way and that like a three-dimensional underwater version of Shibuya crossing in Tokyo.

SADAT UNDERSTOOD our experience level and kept a watchful eye on us and two other less-experienced divers. We weren't always as skillful as we could have been, but we improved a lot as the days passed.

On day nine, we did a morning dive at Magic Mountain. An army of sergeant-majors cruised by as a curious leopard coral grouper posed for my camera.



We were almost 40 minutes into the dive, perhaps 8m deep, when we turned a corner and were suddenly pounded by a current howling over the reef.

It was inexorable, a wall of water that bulldozed everything not rooted into coral or stone. Even the fish vanished.

Yvonne and I kicked like hell, trying to get back to the ridge only a few metres in front of us. I forgot all about my wife as I inched forward, getting tired, finally grabbing something hard.

Another diver had a current-hook anchored into the coral and he hung there in space, bobbing like a kite on the end of the taut rope.

I pulled out my borrowed muck-stick and tried to find a hole or a crack, anything to lock into.

Out of nowhere, Sadat appeared. He grabbed my hand and shoved the stick deep into some crevice I couldn't see, then vanished again. As the stainless-steel rod bowed with the force of water trying to

pull me free, I looked around for Yvonne. She was gone.

What had happened? She'd been right next to me! Sadat returned and signalled me to ascend.

Pushed by the current, I surfaced far from the reef. I handed up my equipment and climbed into the tender, but Yvonne wasn't there. Sadat was still below, and the other three passengers hadn't seen her. Numb with disbelief, I could only wait.

After several long minutes, Yvonne surfaced. Another diver in the second group had seen her soaring by in the current, upside-down and rising fast, trying to dump air with her deflator.

The diver had banged an alarm on her tank. Like Superman, her divemaster flew after Yvonne and with powerful legs pulled her back down to the reef.

Back on the liveaboard, we all talked about her close-call. "Why didn't you use the dump-valve? You can't use the deflator upside-down."

And where was Yvonne's buddy? Meaning me. "It's your job to stay with your buddy," someone admonished me.

Might I have had the presence of mind to help Yvonne? Maybe. But I'd been in survival mode, with no more experience than she. I promised myself that I was not letting her go next time.

If anything happened again, live or die, it would happen to both of us together.

ON THE DIVES that followed, I was Yvonne's wing-man and she was my wing-woman, never more than an instant away from physical contact, always near Sadat.

Sometimes I felt frustrated when I wanted to check out something cool, but wandering off wasn't worth the risk.

Not long after Magic Mountain, near the end of another dive, another current rose up. Yvonne and I locked into the coral with our muck-sticks and looked around at the scenery until Sadat signalled us to ascend.

We had to do our safety-stop, so we knew we'd be blown into open water.

But as Yvonne held my wrist, we also knew we'd be fine. After all, we'd experienced strong currents before. █