

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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MV Infiniti, Andaman Sea, India

the last of the untouched ocean

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Dear Reader:

From a mile away, I could see a small island with a cloud hovering. Coming into focus, the Barren Island volcano announced itself with frequent spewing of ash and thick dark smoke. Closer, I could easily see centuries of lava flows cascading toward the sea, with lush foliage elsewhere. By the time we stopped a couple hundred yards off this uninhabited island, *Infiniti* was lightly covered with black ash. Coming back to the mother boat at dusk after a dive at Barren, I saw bursts of flaming red in the smoke plume.

In underwater caves at the Grotto dive site, I had great views of the deep gray basalt lava formations -- impressive in their sheen, smoothness, and variety of shapes. The surge was powerful kicking into the cave, but worth the effort as I felt I was entering a modern art exhibit of brightly painted rocks, the colors from sponge growth. Surfacing inside for a look, the tall igneous rocks sharp angles were mind-boggling. Continuing on, I came across a field of tall garden eels waving in the black volcanic sand and spotted two stark-white eels, an amazing contrast.

I had been worried whether this trip would be



The Barren Island volcano spews ash and smoke.



worth it and became more concerned when I stepped off the plane at Port Blair, India (population 100,000) at 7 AM, where the April heat and humidity hit me as if I had run into a brick wall. I was on an island chain in the middle of the Bay of Bengal.

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worth it and became more concerned when I stepped off the plane at Port Blair, India (population 100,000) at 7 AM, where the April heat and humidity hit me as if I had run into a brick wall. I was on an island chain in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, about 700 miles from India's Eastern Coast, near 500 miles west of Phuket. I was here to board the luxurious, 133 ft., MV *Infiniti* the next day, but after thirty-eight hours of traveling and I was dragging. After having my Restricted Area Permit to dive the Andaman Islands stamped (I had completed the form at home), I was met by a hotel representative and whisked to my accommodations.

This trip, only offered a few times a year, would journey 327 miles round trip to dive the ultra-remote islands of Barren and Narcondam in the Andaman Sea. The eight-night voyage is advertised for experienced divers only, which I interpreted to mean for those who have proven ability to handle strong, rapidly changing currents and surge, an

intimate relationship with their dive computer, and a willingness to dive on air since the *Infiniti* did not provide nitrox.

Sunil Bakshi, an avid scuba diver and Indian businessman, had his all-steel four-deck *Infiniti* custom-built in Thailand and began his Andaman trips in April 2013. India's first and only liveaboard, she's a beautiful, well-designed, dive friendly vessel, with an all-Indian crew. With only six staterooms for 12 divers it seemed like a private cruise. Air-conditioned throughout, the very comfortable middle deck lounge had a good stock of videos, books, and large LCD screen, as well as a bar with wine, beer, soda, and snacks. Two other lounge areas were open air. My room, brightened up by a large window (not a porthole), held two comfortable twin beds separated by a set of drawers, and a desk area with chair. They changed the bed linens and duvet cover midway and twice changed the towels. The sizeable bathroom had plenty of hot water for the shower.

After traveling four hours from Port Blair, we spent the day diving around Havelock, popular for land-based diving from resorts on the island. On my first dive (to 103 feet), schools of jacks, smaller striped bass, Napoleon wrasse, emperor angelfish, crocodile fish, and an octopus greeted me. A good checkout dive, though visibility was 30 ft. But next dive, it was 60 ft. at Johnny's Go where bumphead parrot fish, a swirling school of barracuda, rainbow runners, grunts and snappers, and mobula ray, swam against a colorful soft coral background.

Then, it was a 15-hour steam, mostly overnight, to Narcondam, a four-square-mile island. With visibility 100+ at Headquarters (named for the tiny encampment of park rangers), the terrain of this dormant volcanic island enthralled me -- coral bommies with open-top swim thrus adorned by schools of colorful tropical fish and even a dozen grazing nudibranchs in very calm water. A photographers dream: soft corals in a large crevice



Infiniti's ample launching deck gives good access to the ten

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With *Durga Stappels* and orange anthias in the background. Peering into a shallow cavern, I saw large puffers and oriental sweetlips. Devils Ridge was a beautiful contrast, with soft corals and huge sea fans. Weaving around volcanic bommies to get out of the current was a fun challenge, as I never knew from which direction the current would come. While sheltering, I saw a three-inch semi-circle juvenile angelfish (also called Koran) doing the same: beautiful with its bluish-black wide narrow blue and white semi-circle stripes. Venturing forth, I watched a white tip reef shark and dogtooth tuna cruise over fields of healthy hard corals. After three dives at Narcondam, I was stoked, ready for the second day, in the warm, 84-86 degree water.

The eleven divers and one non-diver were a diverse and friendly group: six from India, some of whom were repeat guests, two French, two Brits, and us two Americans. There were two sets of retirees: one pair in their 70's and the other in their early thirties (a star professional athlete from India and his fashion model/TV host wife). After watching the sunset from the upper deck, most guests congregated at mid-deck bar and tables and out would come the board games, cigarettes, and booze. The smoke got unpleasantly thick, even in this outdoor area, for we non-smokers from America, and we headed for the non-smoking, air-conditioned lounge.

On our second day at Narcondam, slight current met me at Lighthouse Reef as I descended to view gigantic barrel sponges, one at least ten-feet tall. A mantis shrimp flew by, and a large deep green moray swam from its crevice in the dramatic volcanic topography. After our tender picked us up, we motored between tiny islands to watch two threatened Narcondam hornbills soar above the trees.

At Kabootar Canyon, where the soft coral was stunning at 60 feet of depth, I descended to 109' past dramatic barren black sand terrain with tall boulders, accompanied by butterfly, and bannerfish, rainbow runners, large black jacks, grouper, white tip sharks, huge eight-foot dogtooth tuna, and bumphead parrotfish. Splendid diving, indeed.

As for the food, breakfast was made-to-order eggs and French toast, but I was on an Indian vessel and the buffet lunches, and dinners were heavily spiced Indian cuisine, well received by most, but not so much by me. It included a good mix of aloo paratha (potatoes), chicken sausages, tomato chutney, soybean masala

Fifty-Nine Missing Fish Species

Divers who have been around awhile know how reef fish have declined, and we search for more distant shores to do our diving. The Philippines is one such spot, but in the past 65 years, changes there have been enormous.

Scientists conducted 2,655 interviews with fishermen, learning that 59 fish species have gone missing from catches between the 1950s and 2014. "Similar to the Newfoundland cod, where we saw stocks crash due to overfishing, these reef fish populations have been overexploited, and they may never recover," explains Professor Nick Polunin, of Newcastle University, UK.

The team highlighted five finfish that are now fighting for survival - the green bumphead parrotfish, the bumphead wrasse, the African pompano, the giant grouper and the mangrove red snapper.

Polunin says, "These losses we've recorded in the Philippines are reflective of unsustainable exploitation affecting this exceptionally species-rich ecosystem at a regional level, but they mirror what is happening in ecosystems around the globe. The knock-on effects of losing these species are huge: loss of the big predators is likely to radically affect the structure of the whole system."

Before you order a fresh fish dinner on your next dive trip, you might want to give a little thought to the dying reefs.

And you might want to give thanks for the last reefs on our planet - such as the Andamans in our current travel story - where nations police the waters and protect them from unsustainable fishing.



The Infiniti has six staterooms for only 12 passengers.

lentils, fresh fish in sauce and kadai chicken, but no beef or pork. A plate with sliced cucumber, tomatoes, peppers, and onions was for all share. For me, the cook prepared either fish or chicken (spices), boiled egg and one day made a chicken burger. Oranges, apples

and cut fruit were always available. A stalk of bananas hung on the dive deck. Desserts were most often tasty custards, once a delicious chocolate mousse. The last night the cooks grilled freshly caught lobster and fish on the outdoor upper deck.

The first dive briefing each day could be as early as 6 AM while we had to eat fruit, and coffee or tea; a full breakfast followed the dive. They offered three to four dives daily and two night dives, twenty-four total. For the three-minute trips to dive sites, they divided eleven divers into three groups for the two tenders, mine having the boat driver, two dive guides, and three divers. After briefing, divers put on equipment on the gear-up deck, walked down a few stairs to the ample launching deck, and stepped into the tender, with fins, and camera. I was not up for walking stairs geared up, so the guides, husband/wife Katya and Shy carried my gear into the tender and helped me don it. It was a backroll in, and I exited up the sturdy, well-anchored ladder, after removing gear in the water.

On many dives, the guides asked us to keep near a line they had attached to a buoy or even grasp it to not get swept away and miss the dive site or the boat. There was an unspoken "rule" not to stray too far from the dive guide, and not to fly with the current. My photographer buddy and I got frustrated always having to move onward into current, however mild, when we really wanted to pause and investigate. One day we "rebelled" and just stayed put; Katya got the message better than our repeatedly telling her, and joined us. My trip found calm seas, modest, manageable current, apparently a rarity.

Another rule, of course, was don't go into deco. Although they are well equipped with O2 on board, the hyperbaric chamber was back in Port Blair. Because I was so enthralled with the beauty of colors, fish, and habitats, I found myself frequently getting a minute or two away from deco at depths of 100' plus.

We made the 11-hour trip between Barren and Narcondam at night. I was dubious about diving Barren's Washing Machine, because of the turbulence the name implied but we had no current. It was a stunning dive with more than 100' visibility. The volcanic wall was encrusted with multicolor life -- bright with lots of red thousands of dancing anthias added magic. Sea snakes undulated into crevices looking for prey. On top of the wall, hard coral thrived, and jacks schooled. A couple of mantas made close passes. Large bushy gorgonians grew on the sheer wall, a couple with long nose hawkfish hiding. Purple Maze was ablaze with purple soft carnation coral (*dendonephthya*), surrounded by orange anthias. Coral outcroppings gave the illusion of floating on the black sand -- reminiscent of a well-cared-for Japanese garden.

We spent two days diving Barren, ten dives, repeating three sites, because some sites were too heavily covered by volcanic ash to dive. Infiniti's decks and rails too remained lightly covered with ash.

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escorted the *Infiniti* and, heading toward our und Havelock, where John... up an impressive school of about forty, four-foot long, bumphead parrotfish.

Think of all the tropical fish you know, and diving Barren and Narcondam will seem to have them all. Sometimes I struggled with ID, as the species varied in size, like a 20" bannerfish. Butterfly fish were a challenge, too, with the unusual Indian teardrop, exquisite, triangular, and the blue spot added to a plethora of other. I've seen a lot of bumphead parrotfish diving, but never in such a large schools. It's rare these days to see dizzying numbers of fish, from the small colorful juvenile emperors to impressive mantas, but they are not rare here, nor were whitetip reef sharks, seen on most dives. With few divers and India enforces regulations on commercial fishing, the islands provide a haven rarely found elsewhere. And, course, there is no human-produced runoff, just the natural volcanic ash.

MV Infiniti, Andaman Islands, India: Barren & Narcondam

Diving (Experienced).....★★★★

Diving (Beginning)*Don't go*

Accommodations.....★★★★

Food.....★★★★

Service and attitude.....★★★★

Money's Worth.....★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Worldwide scale

Apparently, maintaining a crew familiar with liveaboards is a challenge, perhaps reflective in having four captains in as many seasons and a change of cooks I seldom saw the captain, but the chief officer was frequently on-scene, friendly and helpful. The three divemasters, three instructors, and two boatmen formed a tight, well-orchestrated team. All had the made my trip as safe and satisfying a any diver could conceive.

I had arrived a day ahead of boarding the *Infiniti*, to give my luggage a chance to catch-up, if needed, and to shed jet-lag, and gave myself a day afterward to off-gas before the multiple flights back home. I had made reservations a Fortune Bay Resort at Port Blair, paying ahead by a bank wire transfer, but I was advised at the last minute the money had not arrived, and it was a hassle for me to resolve. I more easily could have paid with credit card upon checkout. Fortune Bay has a beautiful view of the bay, but it was undergoing renovation. My room was clean, comfortable, and air-conditioned. Reception and drinking and dining areas are covered, open-air; a comfortable bar/lounge area had simple Indian food buffet and a talented singer with a huge repertoire. One floor down, full dinners were served, but no alcohol was offered there.

Yes, diving Barren and Narcondam in the Andamans was definitely worth the loss of sleep and the uncomfortable layovers required in traveling to this remote location. Few places in the world are fishier or have healthier corals. While the corals aren't as numerous as in Raja Ampat or Fiji, their purple haze is something I won't ever forget. I'd return in a heart beat -- if the flight wasn't so bloody long.

J

Our undercover diver's bio: J. Diver says, "I began diving 12 years ago, quickly becoming obsessed observing fish and critter behavior. A thousand dives later, with plenty of time to burn, I've made half my dives in the Caribbean and the remainder mostly in Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Turkey. Using the excuse of absorbing local culture, I've drunk kava in Fiji, penis soup in PNG, and spat betelnut juice in Palau. I'm convinced it helped my fish ID skills in those regions. My last Undercurrent article was in August 2015 the liveaboard Arenui.



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----- **Compass:** Infiniti Liveaboard, eight nights, \$3828.50. www.infinitiliveaboard.com Infiniti makes the Barren-Narcondam trip only in March and April; she travels December-May in the more southern Andaman Islands to avoid the monsoons. . . . Bluewater Travel agent Adam Gibson made the reservations for us, and both he and cohort Mark Strickland (Bluewater Photo), who has written about and frequently photographed in the Andamans, were kind in answering a zillion questions www.bluewaterdivetravel.com Several divers rented gear on-board; there was a well-maintained stock of Scubapro equipment. . . . They supplied safety sausages; I carried my Nautilus Lifeline emergency device. . . . My round-trip flight from St. Louis to Port Blair involved United, Lufthansa, Jet Air, and Air India (does not allow bags to be checked through from or to other airlines - an inconvenience) which I arranged myself through Expedia for \$1311, rough trip; I did it leg by leg; My dive buddy went through Boston, and paid over twice as much. Because of my cheap fare, I splurged for business on the 16-hour Delhi to Newark leg home. I flew St Louis-Frankfort-Chennai-Port Blair Required India e-tourist visa, obtainable 30 days in advance, and \$60. Fortune Bay Resort Port Blair, two nights, \$250, and included lunch and dinner. www.fortunehotels.in Wine and beer were on the honor method: wine from India \$10 USD per bottle, beer \$2. Before the trip, we were advised to bring our favorite bottle of alcoholic beverage, as it is not available onboard.

Turks and Caicos Explorer II

great boat, great food, but degraded reefs

Last year, I enjoyed a trip aboard the T&C Explorer II enough to return; the boat was very comfortable, and though the food was pretty bad, it was clearly a quality operation. The vessel is 124 feet long, with two king bed VIP cabins on upper deck, five doubles with comfortable beds on the main deck, and three bunk cabins below for a total of 20 divers. Every type of late model TV and video is the main salon. On last year's trip, sponsored by REEF, we explored the virtually uninhabited Bahamas islands of Lesser and Greater Inagua. The reefs I saw there were pristine, and I wanted to see a more conventional itinerary starting to the northwest, in Providenciales (Provo).

I came away still impressed with the boat, but with misgivings about the health of the reefs. Most dives featured a couple reef sharks, sometimes half-a-dozen. I don't know about you, but I am never bored when there's a shark in the water. But having dived here some 30 years ago, I was aware that things had changed. Maybe it's not fair to compare places so many years apart; after all, people who have never seen "the old Caribbean" are often happy divers in these waters, as most aboard this trip were.

I learned to dive off Provo in the mid-1980s, and it was lush and pristine. The diving I've seen in and around Provo since then has declined. based on at least

