

The HangLine

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When Two Worlds Collide

By Bill Nadeau

As a dive instructor, boat operator and photographer, I have had the great fortune of exploring new worlds of extreme marine environments and with it – the nautical and diving science that goes along with it. Yet sometimes trying to facilitate those experiences beyond a purely 'academic' application is difficult, as I find that I always seem to focus my stories around a scholastic premise. The urge to want to relate a story or experience about what rewards the job of skipping a Caribbean vessel or the sport of technical and extreme scuba diving bring (without getting into a 'technically intensive lecture') is very strong and I am lucky to write about what adventures these new space-age machines allow us to have.

Recently I had the opportunity to see two worlds of diving technology come together in a fantastic spectacle of science, adventure and exploration. For me it emphasizes the reason why anyone would want to get into the sport of scuba diving in the first place.

This article was originally published in What's Hot Magazine in December 2001. This is the 10 year anniversary of my return from living in the tropics and as such – thought I'd revisit some of the fond memories I had down south.

The Grand Cayman Wall draws tens of thousands of people to this small island every year. For nearly two years I lived in this beautiful and ecologically rich Caribbean country, my occupation: a charter boat captain. As a diver I spent a great deal of time exploring the Grand Cayman trench using a Closed Circuit Rebreather or 'CCR' (an advanced piece of equipment allowing scuba divers to stay down longer and deeper than ever before). The wall we were diving was off Sunset House Dive Resort - a shore-accessible site that boasts some of the best diving on the island. It begins at around 70 feet below the surface and drops to many thousands more

in stepping ledges that flow into a trench filled with diverse marine life. The experience of cruising along this wall in the most sophisticated diving equipment available today can only be surpassed by a walk on the moon (and even then I am not sure).

On one particular dive I had the great luck of being paired up with diving pioneer Tom Mount.





The Cayman Trench – Tom Mount poses at the top of a coral pinnacle about 300 feet below the surface (this time I had a camera). Notice the ambient light at that depth. *Photo by Bill Nadeau*



Extreme Displacement Hulls! **Left:** is the deep sub – at a thousand feet below the surface I finally lost ambient light – but I was dry. **Right:** My wife who crewed aboard the Atlantis XI.

intensity of one's looking ability. Searching for that ideal underwater shot without a camera led us to an advantage unhampered by restrictive viewfinders, not to mention the absence of task-loading, fiddling with F-stops and strobe angles (back when digital had not made its real debut into the world of underwater photography). I still have some of those images of Tom posing next to a 12-foot barrel sponge burned solidly in my mind.

But perhaps the most incredible part of the dive was during our ascent. As we worked our way to the top of the ledge I was marveling at the wonder of how easy technology had made this dive for me. It was those thoughts that primed me psychologically for the next event in an already eventful dive.

As we slowed to make a deep stop at around 100 feet near the top of the wall's ledge, our silence (one of the many benefits of a Rebreather) was broken by a deafening 'ping' and 'whirr'. Glancing over our shoulders we saw a white mammoth emerge from the abyss, level out on the ledge and face us as if to say- 'Wanna

As we cruised along the wall at 250 feet below the surface, we felt discouraged that we had not brought along cameras. The visibility, bright ambient light and a plethora of fish made for awesome photo opportunities. In fear of losing the moment we began modeling for each other and taking pictures using imaginary cameras. The entire experience brought upon the realization that the degree of effective exploration is directly related to the





Play?". It was an awesome sight to first see only its front view port peak up over the wall before the remaining 65 feet of steel technology followed. It was like the sun rising over the horizon.

The temptation was too great. It only took a quick glance between Tom and I to convey

our shared desire to 'stalk' the biggest dive propulsion vehicle one could ever ride. We waved and smiled to the pilots and passengers and when the moment was right, we cautiously slid up next to the viewing ports shadowing the submarine like Remoras clinging to a nurse shark.

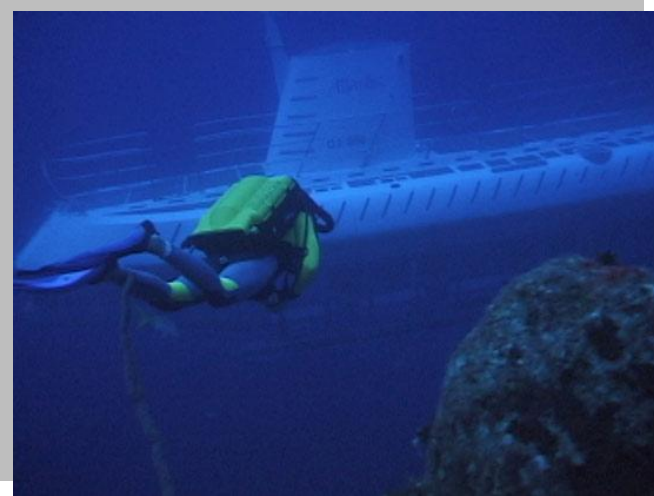
Atlantis XI, one of the many submersibles in the Atlantis Adventure fleet runs tours all over the world and represents another form of diving technology too often overlooked. This particular vessel weighs the same as a 737 plane and can cruise up to two knots carrying 48 passengers and three crew to over 130 feet deep while maintaining a one-atmosphere environment (dry and comfortable). The Atlantis vessels have become world renowned for their ability to take large populations of people through underwater adventures. Atlantis XI is equipped with two 20 HP thrusters and three 30 HP thrusters to maneuver her around the tightest of reef corners - and her skilled pilots do so every day. A large plenum containing 12 stainless steel canisters of carbon dioxide scrubber compound and a large fan moving 260 cubic feet per minute of freshly oxygenated air through the sub keeps the breathing environment safe and healthy.

Along with the Atlantis XI, the operation in Grand Cayman has two deep submersibles capable of 1000 foot deep dives. Together the three subs take thousands of people diving along the Cayman Wall every year.

Looking in through the windows at the faces of all the dry people inside, I found it interesting that we were all using the same technology to gain the same experience.



Approaching the 60 foot submarine - Like diving with a mechanical whale. The trench below drops thousands of feet. Both myself and the people inside are breathing using re-circulated air. *Photos by Bill Coltart*





While hovering near this magnificent beast I turned to see how Tom was doing. He was busy working on his third role of imaginary film, taking pictures of the trail of fish following alongside. With all this technology around me I wondered how long it would be before diving the Cayman Wall would be as easy as these fish made it look. Then I took a picture of what it would look like.

~Safe Diving

