

# PIER DIVING

*The Rewards Are Peerless*

what about...

Story and photos by Ken and Colleen Bondy

**M**any divers think of piers simply as platforms for boarding and leaving dive boats. These divers may well be missing the boat, so to speak, by catching it, because some of the best diving they will ever see might be right under the pier!

Piers, like shipwrecks, are great magnets for marine life. Pilings (the vertical supports for the pier deck) offer an excellent surface for invertebrate animals — anemones, sponges, tunicates and many others — that need to be attached to something. Man-made clutter and junk invariably found on the bottom under piers (tires, machinery, bottles, cans, etc.) provide shelter and hiding places for fish, crabs, shrimp, and other predators and prey that rely on stealth and concealment. Just the shadow of the pier deck is an attraction for small fish and other critters, as anyone who has witnessed the marine life that often collects in the shadow of a boat or a floating kelp paddy knows. Food chains can and do quickly develop under piers, attracting and sustaining a wide variety of interesting marine creatures.

While often overlooked for more exotic dive sites, piers offer great opportunities for divers, particularly underwater photographers and those who want to see unusual critters in a compact, easily observable ecosystem.

We were first introduced to pier diving many years ago in Bonaire at the famous Town Pier in Kralendijk. As enjoyable as the many natural Bonaire sites were, our favorite Bonaire memories always seem to revolve around those magical night dives under the Town Pier. We were enchanted with the profuse, colorful anemones and sponges living on the pilings, the crabs and shrimp we found wandering among them, the eels and octopus peeking out at us from tires on the bottom. We saw our first sea horse there. Since those first dives under Bonaire's Town Pier more than 20 years ago, we have made memorable dives under piers in many oceans, in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Grand Turk, Cozumel, British Columbia and many in our home state of California. After thousands of dives made around the world, a surprisingly high percentage of our all-time favorites have been under piers.

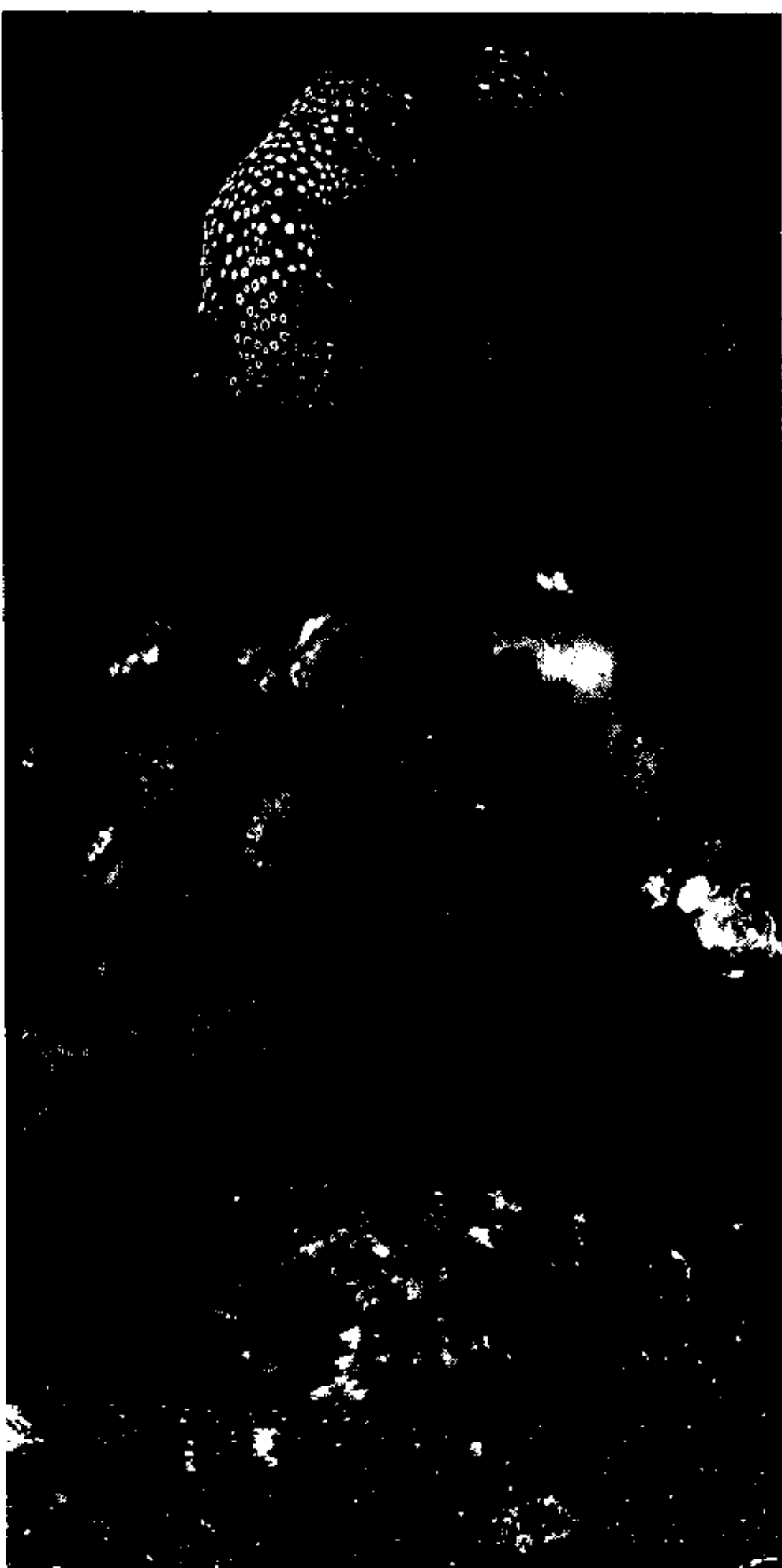
some of those no more than a few hours' drive from our homes.

### Techniques and Hazards

Piers are generally easy and safe to dive, although they do present some unique hazards that must be addressed. Because piers and boats are invariably found close to each other, boat traffic is the primary hazard for diving under piers. The operative word for safely diving piers is "under." Entries and exits should be planned so that the entire dive can be made directly under the pier footprint. Avoid any lengthy surface swims that are not under the pier. If a short swim outside the footprint of the pier is unavoidable and the water is deep enough, take a compass heading and make the swim underwater. Alternatively, make the swim on the surface with a dive flag. It is best to avoid piers that require a lengthy trip outside the pier footprint for access. Often the easiest and safest way to dive a pier is to use a giant-stride entry from the deck of the pier near the point where you want to spend most of the dive. Then, when the dive is completed, swim under the pier to the planned exit point. If the height of the pier deck precludes handing of cameras to divers in the water, they can be suspended from camera lines, and the lines can be retrieved after the dive.

Piers built primarily for boat traffic and anchorage are often in protected waters such as bays or harbors, and lend themselves to easy entries and exits. Diving these sheltered piers is normally not weather-related. However, tidal currents need to be considered. Some piers experience significant tidal changes and the resulting ripping currents that accompany them. These piers should only be dived at slack tides, preferably from one-half hour before the peak high tide of the day to one-half hour after. Our experience with diving tide-related piers has shown that the most desirable water conditions are found on the highest tide of the day.

On the other hand, some piers are built on beaches facing the open ocean and may require surf entry techniques. Examples of this type of pier can be found all up and down the California





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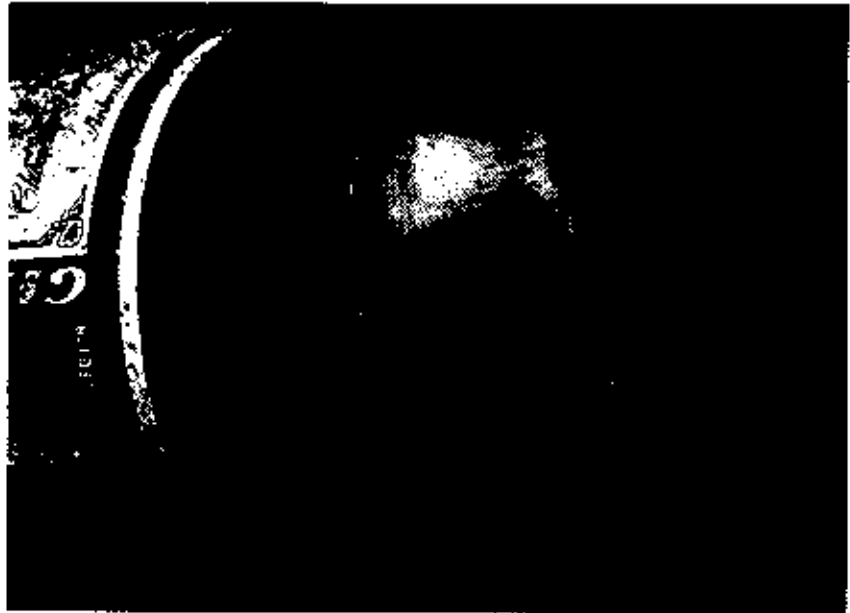


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coast, where they have been built for fishing and attracting tourists with shops and restaurants. Diving these unprotected piers is extremely weather-related and should only be attempted when surf conditions will permit.

A second hazard unique to pier diving is entanglement. Piers attract fishermen, and divers can become snagged in hard-to-see monofilament fishing line, either line being actively used (with a hook at the business end) or old snarls and birds' nests. Obviously, pier divers should carry an easily accessible knife for such occasions, but in addition to a knife we also recommend that each pier diver carries at least two pairs of corrosion-resistant scissors. These scissors should be placed in opposite side pockets on your buoyancy compensator or attached at locations on either side of your body in case one side is inaccessible.

Knives require resistance for cutting through things; scissors don't. For that reason, scissors can be very effective in freeing one from an entanglement with fishing line or some similar material, particularly if both hands are not available. Diving scissors can be found at your local dive center. Because of the unique entanglement hazards present during pier diving, we strongly recommend that pier dives be done with a buddy, with both divers conscious of the potential need to assist the other in the event of an entanglement.

Finally, diving some piers requires the permission of an authority (harbor-

master, private owner, Coast Guard, etc.). Always check to see if the pier you intend to dive requires such permission, and always obtain it before you dive. We have generally found that those in charge of pier operations are friendly and cooperative with divers, and inevitably curious about "what you see down there." Interaction with pier management can also provide valuable information for divers, such as potential hazards and interesting things to look for. When diving a pier for the first time, try to check with someone who has dived it before. Local dive centers can be particularly helpful in this regard.


## What to Look For

Because of their locations, many piers have limited water visibility. This need not present a problem, because observing most of the life under piers does not require much visibility. Most of our pier dives involve slowly examining small areas, either on pilings or on the bottom, and no more than a body length of visibility is necessary. Of course, pier divers must be comfortable with diving in limited visibility. A good light is obviously invaluable. If a pier is blessed with good visibility, the views (and the potential for wide-angle photography) can be magnificent. Wide-angle photos taken under piers, when visibility is good, have fared well in major underwater photo contests.

Pier pilings are often loaded with colorful life. Examine the piling from top to

bottom. Sometimes the most interesting critters are found in the top several feet of the piling. We have spent many an entire rewarding dive looking at just one or two pilings. Anemones of all varieties commonly attach to pilings, and different kinds and colors will occupy different strata. On West Coast piers from California to Alaska, it is not uncommon to see beautiful plumose (*Metridium*) anemones toward the bottom of the pilings in deeper water and large aggregating anemones of every color in shallower water near the top. Many types of life can be found hiding among the anemones and sponges attached to the pilings. Look carefully for nudibranchs, crabs, shrimp, and small fish such as gobies and blennies. We have seen many spectacular and rare nudibranchs under piers, both in cold- and warm-water locations. Under warm-water tropical piers, look for frogfish, arrow crabs, pipefish and sea horses. They are all found under piers, they all make great photographic subjects, and they're all interesting to observe.

Cruise the bottom under the pier and look carefully at all the junk. It provides great hiding places for eels, octopi and small fish. Check out every small opening you see — ends of pipes, ends of bottles, cans, shells, etc. Look closely at these openings; a fascinating little face just might be looking back at you. Piers attract clams, so look in the sand bottom under the pier for siphons. They can be striking photographic subjects in themselves, and we have seen nudibranchs, crabs and shrimp on them. Piers also provide cover and safety for many juvenile fish, which can be spectacular photographic subjects. In tropical locations particularly, keep a lookout for juvenile angelfish, which we have seen and photographed many times under piers.

There may be no need to travel to far-off exotic places to see unusual marine life — it may be literally under your feet the next time you take a walk on your local pier. On the other hand, if you do find yourself in a far-off exotic place, take a look under a pier. You may be pleasantly surprised at what you find there. 

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