



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC ANDREWS

GAY SCUBA, HAWAIIAN STYLE

The Big Island of Hawaii is known for its active volcanoes and some of the best scuba diving in the world. An international group of LGBTIQ divers gathered there in August. Marc Andrews reports.

Scuba diving is something that's done with a passion. It takes just a few hours of training before the uninitiated are ready to head out for their first assisted dive. If that blows their bubbles, signing up for

a dive certificate will see them merrily jumping overboard into any body of water, be it ocean, sea or lake.

There's a global community of LGBTIQ scuba divers and Greg Hamman and his Undersea Expeditions company have been leading gay scuba groups for the past 15 years. Greg is based in Honolulu, and says Hawaii's Big Island is the perfect place for diving.

"What drew me to Hawaii is the kindness and easy-going attitude of the people who live here," says Greg. "The spirit of aloha is real."

Greg's scuba divers (and non-diving partners,

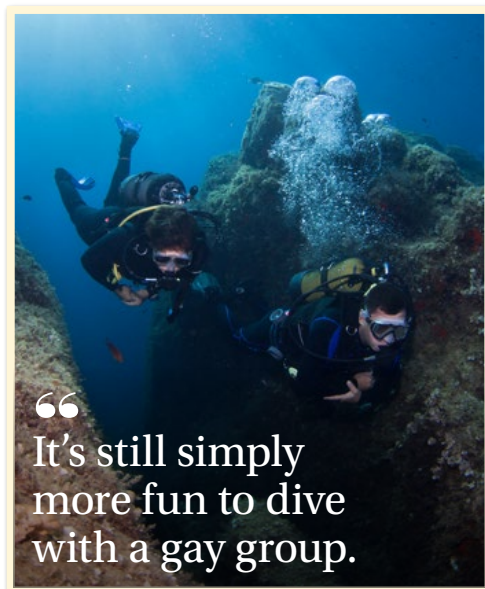
referred to as "scuba widows") are part of a group called BCDs. It started as a reference to bears, cubs and daddies but as the group has grown, so has the diversity of divers. Last August, the expedition group included young multi-racial couples, Wall Street retirees and ex-porn stars.

Diving into the warm Hawaiian waters, the BCD crew swam with hammerhead sharks, dolphins, seals, tiger sharks, turtles, schools of fish and saw a dazzling variety of coral.

With the daily dives completed between 8am and 3pm, there was plenty of free time

to explore the beaches (bodysurfing is a must here), sample the local cuisine or attend an evening luau complete with a healthy appetite.

Scuba diving on Hawaii's Big Island not only offers spectacular underwater vistas and abundant sea life but, above land, the scenery is stunning. It's little wonder that *aloha* means both hello and goodbye.



“It's still simply more fun to dive with a gay group.”

ALOHA UNDERSEA!

Greg Hamman of Undersea Expeditions tells DNA about his tour company, taking gay scuba divers to the best and safest dive sites around the world.

DNA: How long have you been running gay scuba diving tours?

Greg: Undersea Expeditions has organised gay scuba vacations since 1991. I began to travel with the group in the early 2000s and loved the experience so much I left my job at IBM and bought the company in 2004. I spent three months in Cairns on the Great Barrier Reef becoming a PADI Divemaster and Open Water Scuba Instructor. Our founder, Chris Winkle started this group to offer a safe space for gay divers in what could be a homophobic environment at the time. There's been a lot of progress since then, but it's still simply more fun to dive with a gay group.



What do your tours offer that is unique?

What drew me to these vacations as a guest and continues to make it fun as a trip leader, is the sense of camaraderie and a shared passion for scuba diving. We've been all around the world exploring the ocean with other gay men, lesbians and our friends. Almost 90 per cent of our guests on any given trip have travelled with us before and divers new to the group are welcomed and make friends quickly.

Which countries have you taken tours to?

We've led trips to the top warm-water destinations that are safe for LGBTIQ travellers. Some favourites are French Polynesia, Mexico, Cuba, Bonaire, Belize, Palau and the Red Sea.

What are the special requirements when arranging a gay tour?

First and foremost we consider our guests' safety above and below the water. Secondly, what is the local LGBT community like and how can we support them? Third, what "gay appeal" does the destination offer? Not necessarily nightlife, which may not exist on small islands, but aesthetically and culturally.

So, you wouldn't take a tour to an amazing dive destination in a homophobic country?

We don't compromise our guests' safety. Some destinations need to improve on their LGBT rights on a legal basis, but they may still be reasonably safe for travel with caution. It's my belief that the world changes as our hosts get to know us as individuals who happen to be LGBT, rather than an unknown "other" who it's easy to fear or hate. As Westerners we are treated with privilege compared to local gay men, lesbians and transgendered people. I choose to use that privilege to travel as a respectful gay man so that local people working in the tourist industry might eventually become allies and speak up for LGBT locals in their own country. When I've asked local gay men in places like Egypt if they want us to continue to visit the answer is a consistently yes. They want and need our support.

Have you or your tours ever experienced any incidents?

Undersea Expeditions, and many other LGBT companies and organisations, strongly supported a multi-year boycott of the Cayman Islands after a well-publicized incident involving a gay cruise in 1998. While I believe it was important for us to stand together, what ultimately changed the Cayman government official policy by 2005 was the tireless lobbying by our allies living in the Cayman Islands.

Where are the most gay friendly places you've taken tours?

We're fortunate that some incredible scuba locations are in LGBT-welcoming





places like the Dutch Caribbean islands of Saba and Bonaire, as well as French Polynesia, Australia and, of course, Hawaii. Mexico is an incredibly gay-friendly destination and LGBT rights have recently become recognized in Belize.

Any funny incidents along the way?

One of my favourite memories is bringing a group of 30 gay men to a remote Fijian village. We were shuttled across a stream five at a time in a Land Rover. Throughout the Pacific, it's common and accepted for one of the youngest sons in a family to present as female, sort of a third-gender, known as *mahu* in Hawaiian. The village was dancing with us to greet us and one young mahu in his early 20s clasped his hands to his face and squealed with excitement, "This is the best day ever!" as each new group of gay men arrived in his village.

Are the tours only for divers?

Non-divers are welcome and some destinations offer more activities for non-divers than others, for example, resort-based vacations on Roatan and Grand Cayman in the Caribbean or Puerto Galera in the Philippines. Hawaii is a wonderful destination for both divers and non-divers.

What is it you love so much about diving?

The incredible marine life, the colours of tropical fish and coral, and the feeling of flying when neutrally buoyant, able to rise or descend simply controlling my breath and the volume of air in my lungs. It's especially exciting in a drift dive or along a wall.

Is BCD (Bears, Cubs, Daddies) open to all LGBTIQ divers?

Yes. We offer about 12 trips each year that are open to all LGBTIQ divers, friends, family and allies. We don't ask for your gay card, just your certification card! Additionally, there are two trips annually For Women Only, one designated For Men Only, and one annual BCDs Week for Bear, Cubs, Daddies and our friends.

Where are you planning your next trips?

I'm very excited to return to French Polynesia in November. We're also planning to return to the Great Barrier Reef in 2020, as well as Grand Cayman and Philippines.

What's the best thing about your job?

I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to see the world and dive its most amazing locations with fellow travellers who have become my best friends.

GAY LIFE ON HAWAII

The town of Kona boasts a number of fun gay bars with MyBar (motto "MyBar Is YourBar") offering pool tournaments, burlesque evenings, karaoke and sometimes all three on the same night. Mask-queerade is another gay haunt worth visiting if you're staying on this side of the island.



Kona Pride is held annually every September, attracting not just locals but the LGBT+ community from the other eight Hawaiian Islands and even further afield.

Walking hand-in-hand down the street with your boyfriend, husband or just some hot man-of-the-moment is likely, in these parts, to have people looking on encouragingly and enthusiastically. Tolerant, liberal and Democrat-voting Hawaiian society has long been inclusive of more than just heteronormative inhabitants.

"If you didn't sleep with a man, how could you trust him when you went into battle?" Hawaiian scholar Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa explained. "How would you know if he was going to be the warrior that would protect you at all costs, if he wasn't your lover?"

One sexy local Hawaiian man told us during our stay that he often has sex with the "straight men" on the island and this is considered quite normal. In fact, the first time he ever had sex with an openly gay man was during the visiting BCD scuba trip!

ALOHA, HOMIES!

Scuba diving in Hawaii comes with the added bonus that this balmy, sun-drenched region is known as the friendly isles. Hawaii's laidback "aloha" attitude becomes immediately apparent the moment visitors step off the plane. If you're lucky they place a ceremonially lei of flowers around your neck, setting the tone.

The water temperature is a heavenly 25C (77F) in winter to 28C (82F) in summer. Having previously travelled to the smaller islands of Oahu (home to Hawaii's capital Honolulu) and Maui, this was my first trip to the Big Island, also known by the name of Hawaii or *Hawai'i* in the local language.

Diving on this island centres round the west coast area of Kailua-Kona, not far from Kona airport to the north with direct flights from the US daily. The Kona Coast is remarkable not just



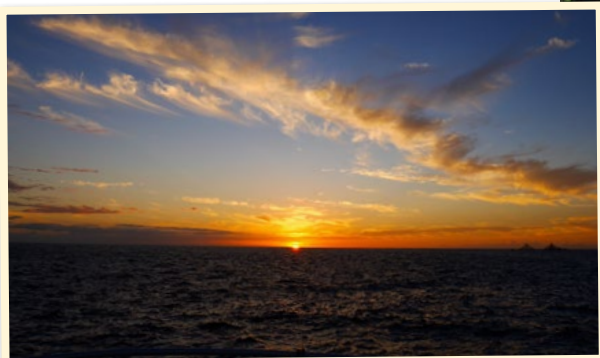
for its underwater attractions (of which there are many), but the eerily-stunning lava-made landscapes, strangely similar to, of all places, Iceland.

Yet this is the quieter side of the island when it comes to recent volcanic activity. On the east side is Hilo, also boasting its own, smaller, airport. Hilo is much wetter, therefore more tropical and lush in vegetation. It has the added attraction of having the active volcanoes of K'lauea, Hual'ai and Mauna Loa.

Last year's eruption caused not only a number of roads to disappear, but the cauldron is still seething and steaming. At the bottom of the new crater a strange, green lake has started to form, which scientists are still genuinely perplexed by.

Hilo offers spectacular helicopter tours over this UNESCO-protected volcanic region (though only around the rim of the active volcano for safety reasons). If ever you've wanted to do a helicopter ride, this is the place to do it and it might just be the best hour of your whole Hawaiian vacation.

MORE: For more visit Gayscuba.com or email info@UnderseaX.com



10 BIG ISLAND MUST-DO'S!

1 Umeke's Fishmarket Bar And Grill in Kona offers the freshest fish you've ever tasted and their cheesecake is served with lilikoi, a local passionfruit.



2 Loko wraps are an island-style Mexican food. The pineapple salsa is surprisingly good.

3 Poke is a local salad of diced raw fish and fresh greens and beans. It's not Hawaii's national dish but probably should be.



4 Less than an hour's drive from Kailua-Kona is Hapuna Point Beach, which boasts all-ages bodysurfing, Baywatch lifeguards on duty and the best fish tacos this side of California.



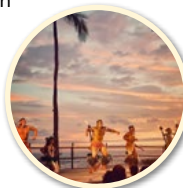
5 The Big Island, as with the rest of Hawaii, is awash with rainbows. On the Hilo side you can even visit the Rainbow Falls waterfall, which guarantees them.

6 Hilo is often forgotten about. Folks do the volcano helicopter tour, then head back to the Kona side. But, reminiscent

of Australia's Byron Bay, Hilo is cool, cute and sweetly hippy.



7 The luau. With hula dancing, hunky men in grass skirts, and slow cooked food in underground ovens, what's not to love?



8 Those who appreciate the beauty of plants will keel over with joy at the site of the gorgeous orchids, hibiscuses and frangipanis in bloom.



9 Both Kona and Hilo have extensive Farmers Markets selling exotic tropical fruit, Hawaiian tikis and local coffee. Check out Hula Daddy's coffee for the name alone.



10 You know those vacay spots where every single photo you take of the sunset is a keeper and when you look back at your phone you've taken hundreds and they all look amazing? That's here!

