

Chapter 5

Diving Pulmo Head

The next morning before breakfast I snorkeled across the sandy bottom to the inner reef in front of our camp. A light surge stirred up the sand and the visibility was limited. Only one species of coral, no more than two feet high, grew on top of the ten-foot-wide lava ridge outcropping three feet above the sand. I turned to my left and swam north along the beachside of the low barrier. Except for the coral, a few tiny reef fish, and a few baby lobster under the crevices, there wasn't much life to be seen. After half an hour swimming down the reef I gave up on finding deeper water. I picked up a piece of broken coral for identification before returning across the now widened channel to the beach. Later, with help from *Sea of Cortez Marine Invertebrates*, I identified the coral sample as *Pocillopora elegans*, Elegance Coral. I later found *Pocillopora elegans* to be the most prevalent coral at Pulmo.

The inner reef obviously wasn't going to do for spearfishing. It was too far to row in Jerry's dinghy from the mooring to the other areas on the map Ralph and Hans had drawn. There was only one other place to try near our camp. Jerry had said there was nothing but sand around the Head. But from the beach it looked like the shelf supporting the coral reefs dropped off a hundred feet out from the Head, just beyond the end of the inner reef. There might be holes along the edge of the shelf with big fish, if the water was deep enough.

After Spam and eggs, I got my diving equipment out and carried it down the beach to the Klinks', leaving Genie in her lounge reading by the water. When I got to Jerry's, he said he wasn't going to be using his cruiser. It was OK to borrow the dinghy. I carried my stuff down to the mooring and dragged the dinghy to the water. After loading my gear, I pulled the dinghy into the water. I gingerly got into the blunt-nosed little craft. The channel was a little rough from the reef break. I was going to have difficulty rowing the unstable eight-foot dinghy without shipping water over the three-inch freeboard. As I carefully rowed back up the beach toward the Head, I nervously watched the boat's gunnels rock back and forth with each oar stroke to within an inch of the water. On the way down the channel the water was so clear I could see the sand grains in the bottom ripples passing fifteen yards below me.

When I got to the Head, I angled the dinghy out beyond the end of the inner reef. About a hundred yards from the point, I put on my mask for a look over the side. When I finally got into position on my knees, I barely managed

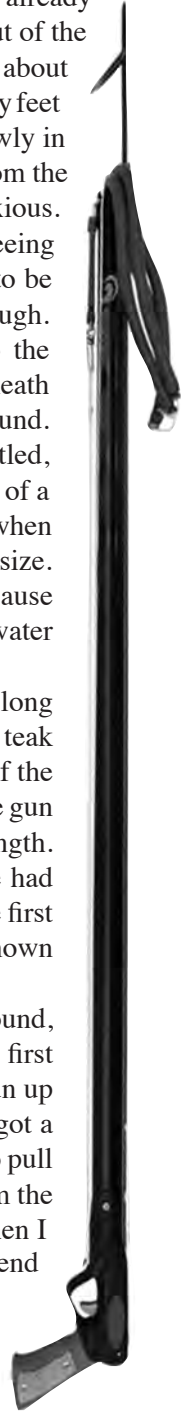
to get my face in the water without swamping the boat. It had already occurred to me I was going to have trouble getting into and out of the water from such an unstable platform. Before thinking more about that problem, I noticed something moving along the bottom thirty feet below me. Incredulously, I watched as four big fish swam slowly in a circle beneath me. It was hard to tell how large they were from the surface, but they were definitely big game. I got more than anxious. I suddenly felt like the novice I was at shooting large fish. Seeing big grouper on my first serious look at Pulmo was too good to be true, even for this fabled Baja hotspot. But the fish were real enough.

I don't remember how I got me and my speargun into the water with the boat still afloat and the fish still circling beneath me. It seemed like I was the reason they were hanging around. In the water I could see the fish were all grouper: dark, mottled, heavy-shouldered, fifty-plus pounders. It's hard to tell the size of a fish underwater, especially when you're looking down on it, or when you're in midwater and there's nothing nearby to help judge size. Besides, fish underwater look larger than they actually are because of the magnification effect of their images passing from the water through the air in my mask.

My next problem was pulling back the three, two-foot-long surgical rubber bands looped around the front of my six-foot teak gun. The stainless, V-shaped wishbones connecting the ends of the bands have to be locked into the three slots on the top rear of the gun shaft—after stretching the rubbers three times their normal length. Pulling maxed-out bands is as much mental as physical. I've had guys a lot stronger than I am give the gun back after pulling the first band halfway. They could have done it in the water if they'd known what it was going to take. But they didn't really have to do it.

After watching the fish to see if they were going to hang around, I reached up and hooked the fingers of my left hand into the first wishbone. Then, for better leverage, I pulled the butt of the gun up from my inner thigh to my chest with my right hand. After I got a hold on the wishbone with both hands I had enough leverage to pull it back to the forward notch on the rear of the shaft, a foot from the rear of the gun. I repeated the procedure twice more. Now when I pulled the trigger, the shaft would be fired. The rest would depend on distance and aim.

When I looked down, the fish were still patiently circling below me. Now I had to deal with my most formidable task.



I had to settle down enough to stop the uncontrolled hyperventilating I was doing because of the exertion and excitement. To increase my time underwater, I needed to be doing controlled hyperventilating. That takes rapid, deep inhalations and restricted exhalations. Controlled hyperventilating increases the amount of oxygen absorbed by my lungs and bloodstream. At the same time it breathes off the carbon dioxide accumulation that triggers the breathing reflex, the urgent “I need air” message. By delaying the reflex, I can increase my comfortable time underwater.

But hyperventilating can lull me into staying down too long, increasing the risk of “shallow water blackout.” The squeeze of higher pressure on my lungs in deeper water will maintain a higher blood-oxygen level than the lower water pressure at sea level. When I’m headed for the surface, the decreasing water pressure causes my blood-oxygen level to drop rapidly, increasing the possibility of passing out. My brain, deprived of air long enough to seriously starve brain cells, will knock me out to keep me from doing whatever I’m doing that’s denying it oxygen. Fainting is not a life and death matter on the surface—but it is underwater.

When I’m free diving the situation is further complicated by having enough lead on my weight belt to sink me without having to power to the bottom with my fins. Less exertion affords me more relaxation—relaxation being the other key to staying underwater longer. Not using my fins also lets me glide down on a fish without scaring it. Having a grouper fan up on its pectoral fins to watch me drift down is an exciting and productive way to get food on the table. But it’s no fun hauling a struggling fish to the surface with extra weight on my belt, when I’m almost out of oxygen.

When I free dive alone I’m very aware that I can hyperventilate too much. My greatest concern occurs when I stay down too long, exerting what I swear is the last of a series of last-ditch efforts to keep a fish from going into a hole. The late “low air” warning from hyperventilating, and the excitement and effort with a fish, all push me toward a point of no return. With big fish and deeper water it’s an even worse situation. So far I’ve survived, but I’ve had some anxious moments going for the surface with my diaphragm convulsing and my legs rapidly weakening. If I don’t have a buddy to watch me go down as we alternate dives, I don’t hyperventilate more than three breaths.

Added to all these problems—and much to my consternation—I was told by my doctor, who is a scuba diver, that breath-hold diving kills brain cells. According to him, the hospital at the Coronado Naval Base in San Diego has done studies with their SEAL units concerning memory problems. Tests on people involved in attempts to set breath-hold depth records have substantiated the risk. Apparently the amount of brain damage does not approach the levels

found for alcohol consumption. I've wondered about all these revelations. They may explain some of my more blatant aging behaviors. The threat keeps me from pushing my bottom time.

That day in front of Pulmo Head I was too excited to get my breathing under control—but I dove anyway. I did not go down relaxed. I wanted air as soon as I got to the bottom. I was kneeling on relatively flat bedrock with sand traps filling in the low spots. Aside from the four grouper, there wasn't anything around but a half-buried stingray. The grouper were still not intimidated. They swam slowly around me, equally spaced, thirty feet away. I waited motionlessly as long as I could, resting the tip of my gun on the bottom. But the fish stayed too far off to shoot. My diaphragm was contracting spasmodically as I pushed off the bottom. I kicked toward the surface with my head up, watching the shiny interface come slowly toward me. I forced myself to remember for the umpteenth time that rushing up in a panic uses more oxygen than relaxing and not going

full out. My diaphragm was jerking down hard on my blocked-off lungs. Unfortunately, terror wasn't blocking the pain. Each clutch was worse than the one before. I was approaching panic. I knew I needed to stay calm, but I ended up going all out as I neared the surface—a pure survival reaction. Describing what the ultimate panic would be like is not something I ever want to do. I know my gag reflex won't let me breathe water no matter how badly I need air—but that is little consolation. If I pass out and don't get back to the surface, my lungs will eventually fill with water after my reflexes cease to function. I've always wondered why people who have been revived after passing out underwater describe the



Scuba diving the Cantile snapper holes

experience as a calm, “seeing life in a flash” way to go. I find close calls with near drowning, or any other oxygen depriving experience, a very frightening ordeal.

I didn’t wait for my head to clear the surface before blowing the air out of my snorkel and yanking it out of my mouth for a full gasp of air. This return to the dry, breathable world always brings immediate relief. While heaving in the largest breath of air possible, I vowed once more not to let this type of ascent happen again. I’m always assuming that in my lifetime I’ll be smart enough to accumulate no more panic ascents than I can count on one hand. My worst imaginary scenario is having my gun cable irretrievably tangled around my weight belt and snagged at the other end in a fish solidly holed up in the rocks. Worrying about sharks is well down on my fear list from this nightmare.

It took five minutes for my legs to revive after the premature dive. My second dive was not much better, but the fish came in closer. I took a long shot. The fish was too far off and had time to dart out of the way of the expended shaft. All four fish disappeared when the gun went off. I snorkeled around the area for a while, pulling the boat by the anchor line. I found a few ledges out in deeper water, but they were too small for the fish I’d just encountered. After swimming the boat to the beach, I got in and pushed off for the row back to the Klinks’. I guess Jerry believed the story. I was still in a state of disbelief myself—so much for my second dive at Pulmo.

When I got back to camp, I told Genie the story. She was somewhat more enthusiastic about my adventure than Jerry had been. Genie had not been in the water yet. After lunch we hauled her fins, mask, and snorkel out of the dive bag and headed up the beach toward the Head. We approached the bare, jagged rock and studied it for a way to the top. The sloping backside of the volcanic Head descended onto the sandy, rock-shored isthmus elevated above the beach from the hurricane shelter. We began carefully picking our way up the loose, decomposing gravel trail leading to the jagged top. At the top of the head, the sheer waterside cliff curved around to the north side above three large, submerged, lava blocks broken off what must once have been a much larger headland. The submerged monoliths lay in twenty feet of water and looked to be good places for lobster. From the top of the Head the view of the reefs was much more detailed than the view from the top of the grade above the airstrip. I made a note to check out the shallow patch reef lying between the Head and the end of the inner reef. Somehow I’d missed seeing this reef when I’d done my dive on the four grouper in front of the Head.

From behind the hurricane shelter, a long, curving, bush-covered dune surrounded the back of a small, sand-bottomed cove below us. A dark, volcanic point half the size of Pulmo Head sheltered the cove at its far end. The point was the same point that blocked the shoreline south of Las Barracas. Biscuit-sized polished gray stones created a steep beach at our end of the small cove.

It looked impossible to exit the water over the loose, wavelike barrier, but the rocky beach would be a minor thrill if we used it to get into the water. We could snorkel across the cove to the far point and then return back around the Head where we could get out of the water at the beach in front of the hurricane shelter.

After returning down the steep trail from the Head, we scrambled across the beach to the steep, stony drop-off. With our snorkeling gear on, we literally rode into the water on our rear ends down the five-foot-high collapsing crest of stones. The swim across the cove to the black-rock point was definitely anticlimactic. From the backside of the point we could see the sand bunker standing out of the water along the shore in front of Las Barracas, a quarter mile away.

On the way back around the Head I took a couple of dives to check out the tight crevices under the blocks at the bottom of the cliff. As I suspected, there were half a dozen small lobster waving their prickly antennae in my face. Picking the bugs would have been simple, but probably disastrous for the isolated little colony's future. I wondered how long the lobster would survive in this spot after a highway arrived at Pulmo.

As we swam blindly through the sandstorm in front of the Head, I got a quick glimpse of what appeared to be a good-sized predatorlike tail disappearing into the maelstrom. It looked like a great place to ambush one of these prowlers—when the water was clearer. Jerry was right about there being nothing but sand in front of the Head. I wondered exactly where I'd been that morning when I'd seen the grouper. I was unaware at the time what a puzzle the bottom in front of the Head was to become in the future.

We washed up on the beach on the south side of the point and headed back to camp. I was way overdue for my afternoon *siesta*. Heaven help Eloise if she happened by this afternoon! I'd worry about the Pulmo Head grouper later.