

Three Ways to Continue the Experience

by Steven Schultz

Sometimes it seems like a challenge for resort facilities to leverage continuing education into a profit center. In many cases, divers travel to dive, not to learn to dive. They prefer to get the most out of their vacations and save the continuing education for when they're home. But, the following PADI Members break down this learning barrier by offering courses that are hard to refuse.

Photo by Ty Sawyer

Ocean Frontiers on Grand Cayman is consistently one of the most highly regarded dive operations in the Caribbean. In September 2005, I worked with co-owner Steve Broadbelt to create and promote a new Distinctive Specialty written specifically for the unique reef environment off the island's east end. A shrewd operator who covers his bases, Broadbelt promotes all PADI continuing education, including Specialty Diver courses. However, while these courses do add somewhat to its bottom line, Ocean Frontiers' new Distinctive Specialty is a highly original course that draws attention to the facility. Called Coral Reef Naturalist, the course teaches divers about the health and reproductive habits of the many local corals and gorgonians.

Coral Reef Naturalist was written to leverage Ocean Frontiers' strengths; specifically, its partnership with brilliant underwater photographer and biologist, Dr. Alexander Mustard, who has studied the coral on Grand Cayman for more than a decade. Through his studies, Mustard discovered how to predict coral spawning behavior, determining which species will spawn on which night and at almost exactly what time.

To make this work, Ocean Frontiers has a professional boat

crew ready and able to support the night diving operations required to deliver the specialty during the spawning event. Timing is everything with this program, and Ocean Frontiers keeps everyone on schedule.

The course rollout coincided with the annual coral spawning following September's full moon. And, in running the course for the first time, Mustard provided spectacular slide presentations and lectured attendees in great detail, but in a way that was both fun and fascinating. A PADI Instructor filled in the requirements to complete the specialty, which included all the points on the Distinctive Specialty outline and a basic night dive briefing. Following the lecture, divers headed to the reef and experienced what they had seen minutes before in the slide show. Attendees enjoyed the program immensely and raved about it on the shore.

From an attendance standpoint, the presenters were worried at first. But, although initial sign-ups were low, the program filled Ocean Frontiers' lecture room and dive boat for three consecutive evenings – during the slowest part of the season – and 17 of the attendees opted for the full Distinctive Specialty certification. It was interesting to note that many of the divers who earned this

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certification were doctors, dentists and other professionals. From a demographic standpoint, these divers represent the peak of purchasing power.

To successfully deliver this program, Ocean Frontiers took advantage of its local environment and partnerships with other interested parties, like Mustard, who provided the scientific background needed to create and deliver the Coral Reef Naturalist Distinctive Specialty. The full scope of the course's success remains to be seen, though it has already brought new students and divers to Ocean Frontiers. Due to the program's originality and the buzz it has generated, the team at Ocean Frontiers fully expects its Distinctive Specialty to be even more popular next year.

At the same time, other dive operators and resort facilities are using more traditional continuing education courses to add to their profitability. Consider the *MV Turks and Caicos Explorer II*, a live-aboard experience that offers divers certification in a number of traditional PADI Specialty Diver courses on every trip. Live-aboards cater to their passengers, who, on the whole, are often more serious about diving and who tend to make more dives during this kind of vacation. Additionally, there are fewer distractions competing for divers' attention on live-aboards, so they're more likely to want to be involved in continuing education courses.

For example, during a trip in August 2005, John Krisbergh, a law student at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, took the opportunity to get his PADI Enriched Air Diver Specialty certification while on the live-aboard. Taking the course while on vacation made sense to Krisbergh, who preferred to improve his dive skills during his free time, rather than just while away the hours.

"This is pretty common for a dedicated live-aboard dive boat," says Krisbergh's instructor, Angelie Petersen of Lake Arrowhead, California, USA. "On every trip there are a few people who want to get certified in one specialty or another. Sometimes it's enriched air or some other con ed class, but there are always a

few courses happening on board that divers can take advantage of to get more certifications."

A few courses a week can add a lot to the bottom line, both for operators and instructors. Consider the example of Ralph Pistor, manager of Pro-Dive Mexico in Puerto Aventuras, Mexico. Pistor is a huge proponent of PADI continuing education and is very impressed with what he calls the "genius" of the PADI System of diver education. "It keeps them coming back," he says, "they become better divers and you get to help them through their growth and education. I love teaching these courses. Everybody wins."

Pistor's passion for continuing education shows in a number of ways. Pro-Dive guests constantly rave about the staff's professionalism and positive attitude, both in person at the resort and in online guest reviews. Also, in a resort area where tourists can be somewhat fickle by nature, Pro-Dive Mexico enjoys a large number of return guests (many from as far off as Europe), who come back over and over to dive with Pistor and his staff.

Pistor likes this trend and plans to leverage his continuing education options by developing a couple of PADI Distinctive Specialty courses based on his area's local diving. One course will teach divers about the local cenote caverns and the other will be a whale shark experience program.

Moreover, in partnership with the spa at the Sunscape® Puerto Aventuras Resort, where Pro-Dive is located, Pistor plans to offer the Mind, Body and Spirit Scuba Distinctive Specialty, which includes stretching, yoga and breathing exercises for divers. This mix of partnerships, PADI marketing and the specifics of Pistor's local diving have allowed him to come up with ideas that are original, exciting and fit in with PADI's continuing education philosophy.

All of these PADI Members are finding new and different ways to make diving fun and exciting – even for experienced divers – through the proper application of PADI Continuing Education. This is adding to their bottom lines and increasing their clientele. So, Pistor is absolutely right about one thing when it comes to PADI continuing education courses – everybody wins. ♦

