Who Is That Masked Man?

Bret Gilliam discovers who “Ben Davison” really is

In January 1977, as I was struggling to build up my first dive operation called V. I. Divers Ltd. in St. Croix, a customer came down and spent a week diving with us. He and his wife had a great time, and as they were leaving, they gave me a cheesy "newsletter" sort of publication called Undercurrent. I'd never seen it before but they explained that it was a Consumer Reports for diving which had recently started up, was distinguished by unbiased reporting on equipment, resorts, dive operations and the like, and was developing a reputation for objective, reliable articles done by its editors who arrived anonymously and just blended in with the rest of the diving customers, then wrote about the experience, good and bad.

Of course, I immediately asked if they were part of this Undercurrent thing and if I was about to get reviewed. They vehemently denied it, saying no one knew who the editors were. They gave it to me so I could see how my competitors in the Virgin Islands and other areas of the Caribbean were faring in their reviews -- and to be forewarned that some unidentified reporter could drop in on me sometime. They also assured me that my company's laid-back attitude about diving freedom, varied sites and great customer service would probably do well.

Wonderful, I thought. Unbiased objective reporting in the diving industry, in which you couldn't even get a mention in Skin Diver magazine without an ad contract? It just didn't seem likely. I was already advertising in Skin Diver and it always seemed to run some sort of little column about V. I. Divers Ltd. in every issue, along with a big yearly section on the Virgin Islands. They thought we were great, but then again, they thought everybody was "world class" if you bought an ad. Let your ad contract lapse, and you fell off the earth into the ocean's deepest depths as far as they were concerned.

So I read through Undercurrent and decided to write the editors immediately to dare them to come down and evaluate us, but nothing ever happened and I forgot about it. Then eight months later, I got the August 1977 issue and the lead story on the front page was a review of my operation, called "The Burgeoning Business of Beach Diving," written by a Ben Davison. My first instinct was to check our customer roster to see when this guy was down with us but, of course, there was no "Ben Davison." We had been clandestinely infiltrated, just as our guests had predicted. I nervously retired to my office to read what they had to say. Here are a few gems from that article:

"St. Croix, however, earned our attention because we respond now and then to a well-orchestrated hustle. In January, a letter arrived from the President of V. I. Divers, Bret Gilliam, saying he would 'like to host one of your writers to see how we fare in your evaluation. We aren't perfect, but we like to think we do a pretty good job of taking care of our guests.' Not long after that, the Virgin Islands Tourist Board wrote Y'all come see us some time, hear?' St. Croix has been an obscure speck on tourists maps... only now is it back... dive trips are offered by a handful of guides in business, more for sun than income, Bret Gilliam included. But he had his eye to the future and after a guide gig or two, he opened his own business, expanded and continued to expand.

"Now he has the only full-service dive shop on the island, and owns the Virgin Diver (an 85-foot liveaboard) that operates one-week charter trips out of British Virgin ports. Along with being an enthusiastic diver, Gilliam's real skill seems to be tough-minded management. Gilliam will bust his buns to get the tourist trade, and I don't doubt he'll be successful. He expects an avalanche of visitors from Skin Diver's forthcoming coverage, and when I was in his shop, boxes of new gear were arriving, and he was continually on the phone hustling new staff to handle the onrush. That's sound planning, and that's why Gilliam's getting St. Croix on the diver's map."

Well, I thought, not a bad start. This guy seems to appreciate the effort I'm putting in and thinks I'm going somewhere. Swell! The article continued: "I selected St. Croix because Gilliam offered a one-week certification course, which I sought for a newly recruited buddy, but only after we had answered his earlier invitation, saying that he would learn of our visit when he read about it in Undercurrent. He replied, 'You're right. Booking as a regular diving customer is really the best way and most objective way to conduct a review. Good luck with Undercurrent.' So Bret, we booked as a regular customer. I was the guy you promised to have a dive for the first day, but didn't..."
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I waved and hurried out the door. As I strode down the hall, he called after me, "Let's chow down on some quail eggs sometime!"

In retrospect, the five-star luxury Buccaneer Resort now has rates that start at $410 and go up over $1,100 a night. The Club Comanche (our hotel base for guests that offered harbor view rooms, pool and a big pier for our dive boats) has only gone up to the $85 - $200 per-night range. What a difference three decades makes... I eliminated the quail eggs garnished with salmon eggs... but the cat beneath the table did."

Finally, I got up, excused myself from the magazine writers' group and left them to be entertained by my publishing partner, Fred Garth. As I was walking out of the hotel suite, a pleasant-looking, middle-aged guy said it was good to finally meet me and asked if we could grab a quick drink before I left.

I think I finalized my commitment to honesty in late 1979, when an editor called in the aftermath of a hurricane to find out what diving conditions really were locally, as they thought they were getting "hyped" by other operators and the tourism board. I replied that, although we would recover just fine in about a month, the rough weather, high winds and silty runoff into the ocean had reduced visibility at the dive sites to two feet or less, and extended as much as a half mile offshore. I recommended that no one schedule a trip for at least six weeks to allow things to get back to normal. Yeah, that cost me some revenue but I made it back 10 times over from customers who came later and said they respected me for telling the truth and putting customers first.

The reviewer also never realized that we ran the boat trips because he immediately opted for our inexpensive beach diving tours than ran all day and at night. "St. Croix diving is well suited for the diver who brings his own tank and buddy, feels confident in new water, and wants to explore the reefs on his own, because there is more than enough beach diving to keep one occupied for a vacation. Gilliam encourages people to head off on their own, and will provide a map of beach dives for anyone who has demonstrated on a guided dive that he can handle himself. For...confident beach divers, St. Croix indeed rates well. Gilliam has two competent guides... and Bill Walker, a gentle and excellent instructor. For the macro photographer, Fredericksfed Pier will provide critters almost impossible to find elsewhere."

I didn't know him and I apologized, saying that I was already late for another event that I was hosting. He shook my hand and said he understood... maybe some other time. I waved and hurried out the door. As I strode down the hall, he called after me, "Let's chow down on some quail eggs sometime!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. I've got a near-photographic memory and had never forgotten that tossedoff critique of my resort restaurant in the original Undercurrent review 20 years before. I turned around and asked what this stranger meant by that. He simply replied that he thought I had a fondness...
once for that esoteric dish.

I looked at him closely and said, "Is that you? Are you really the guy that wrote that?" He grinned and said, "Nice to meet you. I know you're late but I just wanted to say hi finally after two decades."

I looked at my watch, pulled my cell out and dialed Cathryn, who was supervising the Morton's party to say I was going to be a little late. Something important had come up and I'd be along later.

I turned back to the stranger and said, "I'm Bret Gilliam. Who are you?"

And the figurative "mask" came off as he introduced himself with his real name. I was actually filled with emotion to meet the guy who had helped launch my business career through an article in a little newsletter that had made a decision years ago to be a real journal with ethics and give readers the straight, honest truth in an industry that avoided honesty like politicians giving campaign speeches.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'd really like to have a drink with you."

We walked back into the suite, sat down away from the others, and I spent an hour catching up with my newest best friend. I finally made it to dinner 90 minutes late but Cathryn had everything in hand, as I knew she would.

"Well, do you want to tell me what was so important to make you disappear for a dinner that's costing you more than some people's houses?" she asked.

"Sorry, I couldn't break away. I bumped into an old friend I didn't know."

In the years since, "Ben Davison" and I have managed to get together just a half dozen times for dinner in various cities, but it has always been a great occasion with a now dear friend. We talk on the phone a lot. And I still write for Undercurrent, although I've retired from all other diving industry connections except litigation consulting. Let me only comment that it has been my pleasure and privilege to be included in Undercurrent's family over the years. In exchange, I've received a certain sense of nostalgia, fond memories, friendship and benchmarks of the diving industry chronicled in those pages.

"Ben Davison" has done good work for nearly 35 years, the diving industry is a better place and the readers better informed, due to Undercurrent. He has earned his place in history, even though only a handful of people actually know his name or would recognize him. That's a rare entity. If there were a proper Hall of Fame in diving (other than the dubious awards ceremony held by various sycophants devoted to a mutual, self-aggrandizing exchange of statues, medallions, medals and plaques issued to those who lobby the loudest), then he would be in it as a member of the first inductees. And I would proudly stand to applaud him. But I'd never reveal or disclose his true identity. You can "waterboard" me but I ain't giving him up.

Bret Gilliam is a 40-year veteran of the professional diving industry with over 18,000 logged dives. He retired in 2005 as one of diving's most successful and wealthiest entrepreneurs, and now lives on an island in Maine.