

# Academy Awards for Dive Masters

By Bret Gilliam

An integral part of any dive trip is the relationship that divers form with the dive masters responsible for getting them to the sites. These relationships can make or break a trip and everyone has different expectations. Most experienced divers simply want a guide who gives good briefings and gets them on an exciting spot while being left alone to pursue their own interests. For newer divers, the dive master provides an invaluable service by, essentially, bird-dogging them to keep them out of trouble while easing the learning curve of buoyancy control,

experienced divers simply abandoned doing business with those types of operations. The dive masters that understand their guests' needs and cater to providing that service without intrusion have flourished. Some have even attained "rock star" status with faithful customers following them when they change employers or locations. Larry Smith, generally considered the best dive guide in Indonesia, is a good example. Smith has been with a baker's dozen of operators over the years and his name alone attached to a liveaboard can bring new business. Rob Barrel



Nico Ghersnich of Italy

Mario Arroyo of Costa Rica

Miguel Sanchez of Spain

navigation, getting geared up and all the thousands of things that new divers need to be assisted with, so mistakes turn into positive learning experiences instead of survival situations.

In my business, the dive masters play a vital role in helping me anticipate predicted marine life encounters, sometimes helping with camera gear and lighting, as well as providing support for decompression and rigging specialized equipment. Of course, most professional dive masters are also instructors and frequently have expertise in either still photography or video. Some are good, some not so good. Some can be insufferable "scuba police" head cases who want to shepherd all dives to the lowest common denominator. (Think of the Cayman Islands typical dive master mentality through most of the 1990s.)

Mercifully, there's less of that in the new millennium, probably due to the fact that

and Cat Holloway of the *Nai'a* in Fiji earn the same respect along with Lenny Kolcynski who starred on the *Truk Aggressor* and Peter Hughes' *Sun Dancer II* before launching his own liveaboard in Truk with the *Odyssey* in 2000.

Deserving a place in the ranks of those exalted professionals are three of the permanent dive master crew of the *Sea Hunter* operation providing service to Cocos Island and Malpelo Island. Mario Arroyo of Costa Rica, Nico Ghersnich of Italy, and Miguel Sanchez of Spain are some of the best I've ever seen. All are TDI instructors and Senior Course Directors with ratings for nitrox, decompression procedures, and rebreathers to their credit. Each is fluent in several languages and possess that rare ability to bond with guests of all experience levels. Additionally, each man is an accomplished videographer and they regularly produce footage that equals or surpasses the best you'll see on

any natural history documentary or film release.

They are able to handle the needs of any guest and excel in helping divers transition the steep challenges of Cocos' demanding dive conditions and mastering training in rebreathers. They each manage to be vigilantly watchful of guests and are quick to intercede when help is needed, while never overtly intruding into the divers' enjoyment of a dive unless necessary. For well-experienced divers and professionals, their assistance is simply invaluable. Whether it's pointing out the hard to find red lipped batfish, recognizing the first hazy approach of a whale shark in the blue gloom, dropping you into a school of hundreds of hammerheads, or sniffing out a bait ball formation, these guys have an

innate sense of getting to exactly the right place at the right time. Basically, when in doubt, follow Mario, Nico and Miguel and you'll be virtually guaranteed the marine life encounters you want.

They also are the social heart of the *Sea Hunter* operation and will eagerly pass on tips to aspiring photographers, help with camera gear glitches, and can seemingly repair anything in the field that dares to break down when you're 400 miles offshore in the middle of nowhere with no spare parts. I've done hundreds of dives with these guys over the years and it's my pleasure to turn the spotlight on them now and say "well done." They're tops in their profession and divers of all levels will find their experience enhanced by their presence. Muchas gracias, amigos! 🇵🇷

# CONSERVATION VICTORY

By Bret Gilliam

One major inhabitant was conspicuously absent from Cocos this year. During the past 10 years, the number of fishing vessels anchored in the island's protective harbors have steadily grown to alarming numbers. When I first visited there, only a few ramshackle boats were making the 360-mile crossing to Cocos. By the summer of 2002, more than 50 of these scows were scattered across Chatham Bay and Wafer Bay, the island's only two protected harbors. Fortunately, the Costa Rican government – through

pressure from divers, dive operations and conservationists – banned fishing boats from dropping anchor at Cocos. Because of the long journey across frequently dangerous seas, these smaller boats have elected not to fish the waters beyond the park surrounding the islands if they can't seek shelter in the bays. Now the only boats plying the area are three liveaboard dive vessels and a brand new 36-foot patrol boat to enforce Cocos' 12-mile fishing buffer. Sometimes the divers, and marine life, do win. 🇵🇷



Scene from the past: fishing vessels now banned from Cocos' anchorages. This has curtailed poaching and illegal fishing dramatically since 2002