

ScubaLab Rates 14 New BCs

SCUBA DIVING

THE MAGAZINE DIVERS TRUST

[CORAL SEA]

SEVEN DAYS
IN THE UNTAMED
WATERS BEYOND
AUSTRALIA'S
BIG REEF

Thrill Ride

Raise Your Dive Boat IQ

Dive easy and look like a pro on your next trip.

Best of the Bahamas

Readers rate dive operations and live-aboards.

Mysterious Belize

In search of whale sharks and the secrets of the ancient Maya.

6
Great SoCal Beach Dives



Aquanaut Nipoje P. Stott beside one of the habitat's portholes.

(MISSION)

HOUSTON, WE'VE GOT NURSE SHARKS

NASA sends aquanauts into the deep.

In April, four NASA aquanauts spent 18 days in the water off Key Largo, 60 feet below the surface, on a mission to help the agency prepare for future lunar exploration.

Equipped with communication systems that allowed Mission Control in Houston to follow and direct their movements, the NEEMO 9 team performed various tasks required in space, like construction, area mapping and sample collection. They also took "sea walks" to test astronaut life-support packs—weighted according to the gravitational properties of the lunar and Martian surfaces—and simulated remote telesurgery, performed by a surgeon in Canada controlling a multi-armed robot.

Like the space environment, the undersea world poses unique challenges for even short-term human habitation. Besides having to deal with funky wetsuits (which attract

bacterial growth), the team faced rough seas that produced constant pressure changes inside their temporary home, the 45-foot-long Aquarius underwater habitat and laboratory.

But the chance to be eye-level with the fishes 24/7 gave the team an intimate look at some otherworldly phenomena. During a night dive illuminated by a full moon, for example, the aquanauts were treated to a dazzling display of bioluminescent plankton, a spectacle appropriately reminiscent of shooting stars. "Both [the moon and the ocean] represent final frontiers, unforgiving environments that amaze us with awe-inspiring beauty," said team leader Dave Williams. "They create in us an awareness of the need to protect our planet for future generations." —ANDY ISAACSON