Oceans Apart

A couple reconnects underwater in French Polynesia’s Tuamotu Archipelago

By Terry Ward

I am 40 feet underwater, diving off the coast of Loreto in Baja California, Mexico, when my husband falls from a ladder and suffers a traumatic brain injury at our home in Tampa, Florida, 2,500 miles away.

The scene below the surface is a dream—a drift dive along a volcanic wall waving with soft corals, where eels hang their gaping jaws from nooks and crannies and clouds of yellowtail snapper flutter past. At the end of the dive, I’m the first to reach the boat ladder, shivering in my wet suit, but I decide to linger on my safety stop to take in the waters that Jacques Cousteau called “the world’s aquarium.”

When I climb back onto the boat, the dream becomes a nightmare. A flurry of missed calls and text messages. Javier is in the ICU. I can’t breathe. Someone puts a towel over my shoulders, and a pod of dolphins that had evaded us underwater—we’d heard their vocalizations the entire dive but never saw them—suddenly encircles the boat as if escorting us back to them—suddenly encircles the boat as if escorting us back to the docks so I can hurry home.

Two months later, I was pregnant with our son, and not long after that, Javier, who is Cuban, landed at the airport in Miami with a K-1 visa in hand, my 90-day-fiance in real life.

The five years that followed were a blur. One kid turned into two. And there were so many things to navigate within the powder keg of cultural differences and differing expectations (his: a hot lunch; mine: girls’ weekends—you can guess who won that one). Javier would tell me to iron his shirts and even gave me tips on breastfeeding, much to my irritation; on the other hand, he would cut my father’s hair and swab the wax from his ears when he came to visit, wondering why I didn’t take care of my own blood the way he did growing up. When I met him in Negril, Jamaica, he’d only ever been on one flight, the plane that carried him there to see the Pacific. When I met him in Negril, my belly growing rounder and had lost track of how many countries I’d been to, he promised someday to take me to see the Pacific.

Maybe it was because I was 40 and open to exiting a long-term relationship that had been going nowhere for too long, but the line worked. Maybe I would even have a baby before it was too late. We fell in love like something I’d only seen on the big screen—ridiculously fast, hopelessly deep.

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My final year at the University of Florida, I took every chance I got to be underwater. Javier was a natural freediver, plunging down to spear a lionfish for dinner or pluck a lobster from a crevice with his bare hands. When we first met, we’d snorkeled in front of his apartment in Negril, my belly growing rounder and had lost track of how many countries I’d been to, he promised someday to take me to see the Pacific.

I dreamed of traveling with him to Tahiti, my favorite palm-fringed place in the world, and the Tuamotus—a largely uninhabited archipelago of 77 atolls and islets spread across 930 miles of Pacific Ocean, a one-hour flight from Papeete—where we could scuba dive and take in the best underwater views on Earth. Removed from the honeymooners and busy overwater bungalow scene of Bora Bora, the quieter atolls attract an intrepid crowd of divers and sailors (the latter living largely off the grid). Currents rush through coral-covered passes into lagoons rich with marine life at atolls like Rangiroa, Fakarava, and Tikehau, creating dive sites that are the stuff of legend.

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We know we have to celebrate this milestone and Javier’s recovery, and we don’t want to waste any time. His doctor has cleared him to drive—and to dive. So, just six months after his accident, we take off for a day in the Tuamotu.

Our first day of diving isn’t what I hoped for. On the outside of the pass that flows into Rangiroa, the world’s second-largest atoll, which circles 16 miles around a pristine lagoon, we deflate our buoyancy control devices to descend into the water and start our first Pacific dive together. Only, Javier isn’t going down.

Barely below the surface, his eyes are wide in his mask—and not at the sight of the dolphin and its day-old nursing calf that finned under us in a flash. Our dive guide gives him the “OK!” hand gesture to see if he’s fine, but he just shakes his head, rubbing both sides of his jaw, as if trying to coax a genie from his brain. He stares longingly at the surface.

We pop up, and Javier pulls the regulator out of his mouth and swims back to the boat. He doesn’t want to go down. Some-thing about the very way he felt when he went underwater reminds him of his fall from the ladder, he says—even though he can’t remember that moment at all. I continue on my own with the guide, bumbled I can’t share everything there is to see in this place we’ve traveled so far to dive. For all the differences we have on land, the ocean is a world I want so badly to be both of ours, in a way that topside culture so far hasn’t. But I don’t want to push him. With a dive guide as my fill-in buddy, I drop into the depths and sometimes peer up to see Javier kicking in the shallow, the gin-like clarity of the water making the distance between us seem even greater.

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On our last day on the water in Fakarava, we head out with Thibault Gachon of O2 Fakarava dive shop. Javier lets Gachon know he has problems descend- ing and would prefer just to snorkel instead. I’m used to this routine by now, and I hide my disappointment even though Fakarava’s north and south atoll passes, Garuae and Tumakohua, are my favorite of all. At the latter, you enter the water outside the pass and drop immediately into a wall of patrolling reef sharks that darkens the 8-foot-deep water column, then ride the cur- rent past clouds of jewel-toned anemias and other tropical fish crowding the shallow corals of the lagoon. Sometimes, mantas wing by. It’s pure ocean won- der, abundant and accessible in a way that’s matched by few places on the planet.

As we approach the dive site, though, I can see that Javier is calmer than he has been before any other dive on this trip. Gachon convinces him to try to go down one more time—winning an argument no wife could—and as he slowly guides Javier down from the surface, I look up from below. My husband is, of course, a natural, with the buoyancy control of a far more experienced diver. After all, he has been adapting and surviving since the day he was born.

As we fin next to each other, he grabs my arm to show me pyramid butterflyfish and Picasso triggerfish—typical Pacific denizens that capture his eye because they’re so different from their Caroli- bean cousins. I point out Christmas tree worms and other oddities I’ve learned to spot after many years of diving.

Gachon directs us to kneel under a ledge, sheltered from the current. The stiller we stay there, the closer the curious sharks come. Our wide-eyed gazes switch between each other and the animals. Even if we could speak, there is no need. Some might say you shouldn’t have to travel thousands of miles to remember the things you’ve always seen eye to eye on. But sharing this world below the water helps remind us of all we have in common back at the surface, too.