

THE NATION

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Scuba divers stranded overnight

■ Couple survives by climbing reef marker after boat leaves without them

By LISA FUSS
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

KEY LARGO, Fla. — A California couple who went scuba diving in Key Largo saw more marine life than they bargained for: Their chartered dive boat inadvertently abandoned them, leaving the two stranded in the water overnight, six miles from shore.

Michael and Linda Evans, both 51, of Castroville departed Aqua-Nuts Dive Center early Tuesday afternoon aboard one of its two 42-foot vessels for what was supposed to be a two-tank dive. When they surfaced after the first of two stops at The Elbow, a reef just outside John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the dive boat — along with its 23 other scuba divers and two crew members — had pulled up anchor and left.

With wind speeds at about 25 knots, waves measuring up to four feet and water temperature dropping to the 60s, the couple managed to swim to the 36-foot steel light tower marking the reef and climbed atop its platform, where they spent Tuesday night and most of Wednesday, the Florida Marine Patrol said.

A passing sailboat spotted the couple, who were wearing wet suits, on the platform late Wednesday afternoon and contacted the marine patrol. Both suffered from exposure as well as minor cuts and scrapes to their hands and legs from climbing onto the structure.

On Thursday, the couple met with Aqua-Nuts co-owner Shirlee Thaler for several hours to

discuss the incident and reportedly checked out of Kelly's on the Bay, the dive lodge next door that Thaler and son Ricky Thaler own and operate.

Ricky Thaler said the couple did not want to talk to the media.

Ricky Thaler insisted Thursday that his dive shop has a clean safety record and has never made such a "stupid" mistake in its eight years in operation. Saying he wanted to restrict his comments until he could talk to a lawyer, Thaler declined to elaborate on the details of the ordeal, including whether or not a head count — standard on scuba trips by most dive outlets — had been taken.

"This is absolutely devastating to us," said Thaler, a boat captain and certified diving instructor. "We've spent years building a great reputation and trying to stay on the leading edge of dive

technology, and something horrible like this happens. . . . We have always taken safety seriously."

While safety records on Aqua-Nuts' two vessels were unavailable at press time, the dive resort has earned numerous awards, including the coveted PADI International Resort Association's "Gold Palm Resort" accreditation. Aqua-Nuts also was recently named among the top five best dive operators in the Keys by Scuba Diving magazine. Last year, Thaler and his staff trained more than 380 dive students.

The incident involving the Evanses has been turned over to the U.S. Coast Guard's Marine Safety Office for investigation. Lt. Doug Campbell, who is handling the case, said several actions can be taken in such a case, including assessing civil

penalties or charges against the boat captain.

Thaler said it is unknown whether Michael Evans, who is an attorney in California, intends to take legal action.

News about the ordeal spread quickly Thursday around the Key Largo diving community. While several dive operators recalled incidents where divers were left behind, all pointed out that none were abandoned more than an hour or two.

Barbara Navarro, co-owner of Key Largo-based Divers City USA, said a manifest is kept on shore and onboard during every dive trip with divers' names, instruction levels and equipment. Navarro said a head count is always taken.

"You can pretty much tell when someone is missing," Navarro said. "Empty seats usually gives it away if nothing else."

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