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A scientist, explorer, aquanaut, mariner, successful treasure hunter, undersea archeologist and marine environmentalist, yet incredibly, Ian Koblick remains relatively unknown.

Words - Jim Gilbert

Ian Koblick says his life has been cursed by an obsession. "The truth is," says the 76-year-old, an ever-present smile twitching at the corners of his mouth, "I am driven to do things. It's a curse, really, a disease, because once I do them I am driven to do something else. I get bored with things once I have accomplished them."

Not everything he's attempted has proven successful, but with determination even his failures often provided unforeseen benefits. For example, there was his first experience with yacht ownership. In 1981, his Marine Resources Development Foundation accepted *Golden Venture* as a donation. *Golden Venture* was a large ocean-going tug that had been refitted as an explorer-style yacht. Originally named *Schelde* at launch in 1958, she was a 147-foot single crankshaft diesel electric vessel, built for the giant tug and salvage company Smit International. The man who had transformed the old workhorse into a pleasure craft was captivated by the unfolding discoveries of artifacts and treasure off the Florida Keys and elsewhere. Koblick's extraordinarily successful career, managing, designing, building and living in various deep-water habitats for NASA astronaut training and advancing the technology of deep-sea exploration, was on the wane due to declining public interest in deep-ocean exploration and a concomitant dip in government financing.

Koblick was invited on one of *Golden Venture's* early cruises to explore some of Colombia's offshore waters for undiscovered wrecks. But the cruise turned into a nightmare because of mechanical problems and the arrest of the vessel by Colombian authorities due to inadequate cruising permits. After this misadventure and a series of lackluster expeditions, *Golden Venture* finally returned to her berth in Palm Beach, and her owner offered her to Koblick's foundation. Koblick admits to

having visions of *Golden Venture* becoming his charity's version of Jacques Cousteau's famous *Calypso*. He readily agreed to the deal, even if it meant mortgaging his family home to raise enough cash to pay the brokerage commission.

Like many new yacht owners, Koblick soon learned that operating a large vessel was far more expensive than he anticipated. Unbeknownst to him at the time, *Golden Venture* was suffering from a misaligned engine bed, which resulted in a succession of broken crankshafts that crippled both the boat and his operating budget. Equally impairing, he discovered, was a series of crew problems that eventually forced him to take active control over the vessel.

The yacht was virtually sidelined with only one of her three genset mains in working order when Koblick entered into a joint undertaking with famed treasure hunter Mel Fisher, then actively working on the newly discovered wreck of *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* off the Dry Tortugas. *Golden Venture* limped her way to join Fisher and began successfully dredging up gold bars and coins. On July 12, 1982, Koblick was on deck in the growing dusk preparing for his 43rd birthday party when he learned one of the crew was still below. He donned a mask, fins and tank and joined the diver, who he found frantically trying to dig a hole in the soft sand. Between them they managed to find a small, inauspicious silver box. When they opened it back on deck, they found themselves staring at one of the most significant finds from the *Atocha*, a ring and a large gold crucifix encrusted with emeralds that the world now knows as the Bishop's Cross.

While the treasure yielded Koblick enough cash to get his family out of hock, kudos for *Golden Venture's* discoveries went to Fisher. That was fine with Koblick, whose already-illustrious career was repeatedly marked by a willingness to remain the ultimate insider, the force behind the scenes of several extraordinary

The most famous

man of the sea

you've never heard about!

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF IAN KOBICK

accomplishments in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

In 1964, after a post-graduate course at Stanford University Marine Lab, his biology professor criticized him for “recklessly” collecting samples by diving instead of the proper scientific way of combing the beach. He was stunned by her attitude. “I remember thinking, ‘How will we ever understand the oceans if we study them from the beach? Man needs to live and work in the sea if we are ever going to know about it.’” He and his wife, Tonya, also a marine biologist, decided to seek their futures in the warmth of the Virgin Islands, where they had both been offered teaching positions. After a few hectic years of getting settled, working several jobs at once — including opening a string of small dive shacks — Koblick attracted the attention of the director of the newly formed Caribbean Research Institute, who needed a jack-of-all-trades to build and run the institute’s first facility. “I got the job because he only had the budget for one person who had to know about biology, construction, diving, boat handling and engine repair. Besides, I was the only person he could afford.”

Shortly after the facility was completed, he learned a big delegation of government, corporate and military VIPs were coming in for a visit. He was asked to host the group, which was searching for a location to build Tektite, an advanced underwater habitat. It would, among other things, house a team of aquanauts who would conduct research as well as develop training protocols for NASA astronauts who needed to learn how to live in enclosed spaces and work in a hostile, weightless environment.

It was due to Koblick’s impassioned sales pitch “and maybe the availability of cheap rum,” he jokes, that the project team selected the new research station to be the site of the habitat. Upon learning the already-selected aquanaut team had no alternate member, he offered himself, even though he was entirely a self-taught diver. As part of the preparation and training for becoming an aquanaut, Koblick had to endure a series of dangerous and painful medical tests, including agonizing bone marrow analysis and breathing pure oxygen and CO2 until his body began to convulse.

The first Tektite mission in 1969 — 60 days of uninterrupted living and working in 50 feet of water — was a huge technical and public relations success. So much so that they were able to create a second, expanded project that would have equal attraction for the public and federal funding. The Tektite II operation, with Koblick now as project manager and scientific director, decided that one of its dive cadres would be an all-

female aquanaut team. The program, which included famed ocean explorer Dr. Sylvia Earle as part of the women’s team, lasted six months, with each of the 53 aquanauts spending between two and three weeks on the ocean floor carrying out a wide array of missions.

Despite the Tektite successes, Koblick felt the program was not pushing the envelope enough. The habitat itself, developed commercially by designers with lots of aerospace experience but little underwater knowledge, was fraught with problems, including an inoperable toilet. Koblick wanted to double the depth at which people could live and work for extended periods of time. Ultimately, he wanted to allow humans to operate safely beyond the edges of the world’s continental shelves — where much of the ocean’s mineral resources and marine life exists — at depths of up to 300 feet.

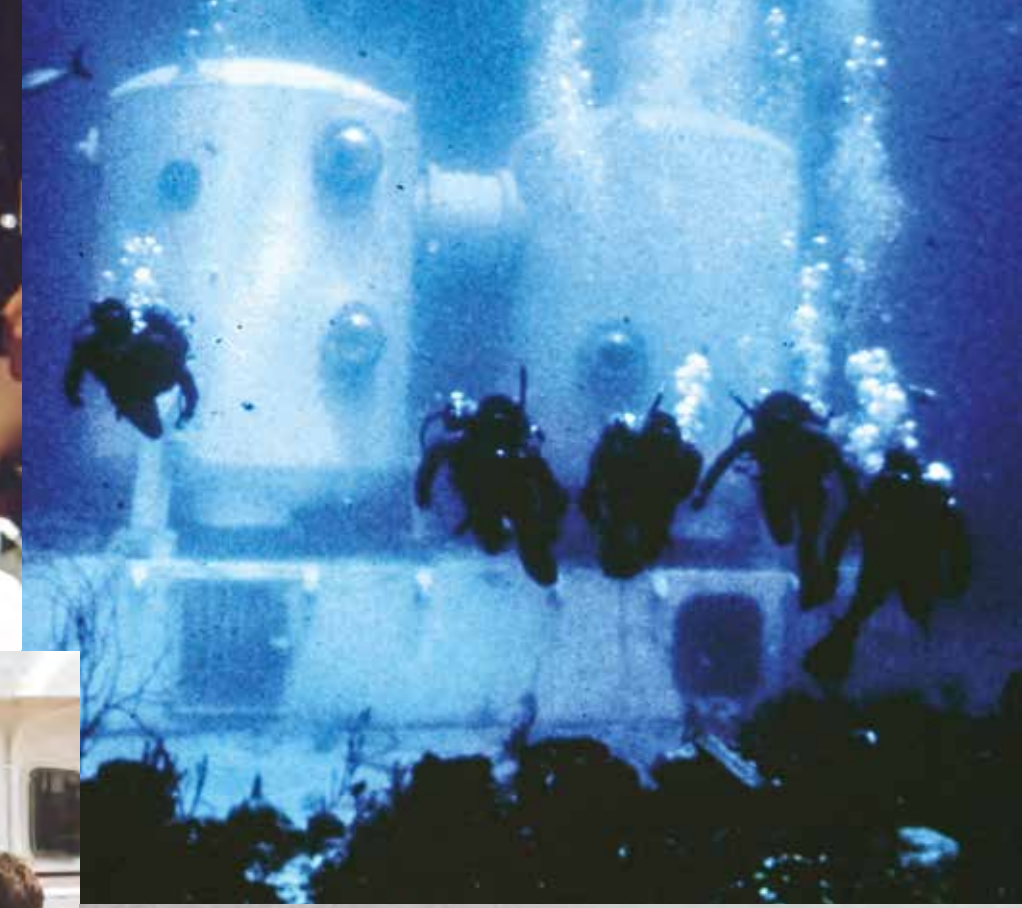
As usual, Koblick found himself at the right place at the right time with an invitation to meet with Luis A. Ferré, then-governor of Puerto Rico, to explore establishing a high-profile underwater habitat on the island. Within months, Koblick was working at flank speed on a 30-acre site on Puerto Rico’s west coast developing both shore and underwater facilities for an enhanced deep-sea milieu, which would be the centerpiece for an ocean research park. Ever resourceful, he approached John Perry, the successful owner of Florida-based Perry Submarine Builders. Koblick told Perry he didn’t have the \$360,000 necessary to pay for a new, state-of-the-art habitat and rather cheekily asked him whether he would consider loaning his foundation the money he needed. A week later, Perry agreed and construction began. Little did he know that the setting he and Perry designed, which he named *La*

Chalupa, would ultimately become Jules’ Undersea Lodge. This unique, famous aquatic hotel in Key Largo, Florida, is also regarded as among the world’s most successful continuing ocean education programs.

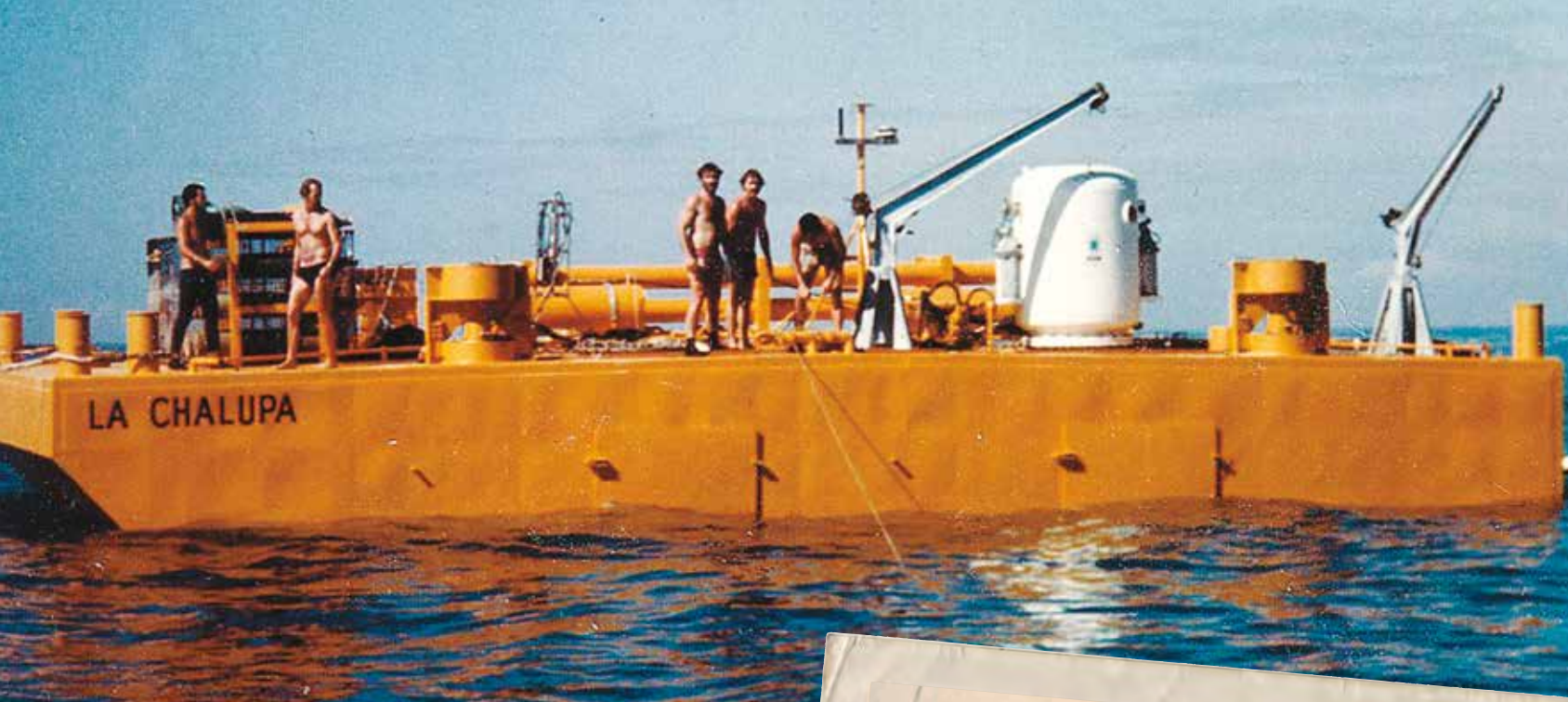
Using new inexpensive gas-saturation diving techniques perfected in Tektite, Koblick and his team learned how to live and work effectively at depths heretofore unknown in the world of scientific diving, often undertaking expeditions half a mile away from their habitat. But expanding human knowledge of undersea living was not without significant risk.

Early in the project, he and a fellow diver were laying down 500-foot sections of line to create a mapping grid around the habitat. They were using modern re-breathers and nearing the end of a 40-minute work shift, Koblick found his mouthpiece full of water. He signaled to his partner,

The coral around Koblick began to blur. “I remember repeating to myself, ‘Mother Ocean you are not going to get me.’” Just 50 feet from safety, he passed out.



Top left and right: As a pioneer of undersea living, Koblick served as an aquanaut in the Tektite mission, conducting oceanographic research. Below: With a young family and an island-hopping lifestyle, Koblick and wife Tonya bought Isoletta, a 70-year-old 70-foot ketch as their mobile home. Left: Teaming up with Mel Fisher (left in center image), Koblick launched a treasure hunt from his Golden Venture yacht and unearthed the Bishop’s Cross (bottom left).



and they began swimming back taking turns breathing from the remaining working apparatus. Less than 100 feet from the habitat, the air supply was finished and they were forced to split up.

Koblick said the coral around him began to blur. "I remember repeating to myself, 'Mother Ocean you are *not* going to get me.'" Just 50 feet from safety, he passed out. When his partner reached the habitat, the third member of the crew asked him, "Where's Ian?"

"We've lost him," he replied forlornly. But when the crew member ducked his head below the water, he saw Koblick bobbing up and down on the bottom just beyond the site. They rushed out, retrieved his virtually lifeless body and after a few minutes managed to resuscitate him.

The *La Chalupa* project lasted for three years. Bit by bit, Koblick and his team learned how to live and work for weeks at a time reaching excursion depths approaching 300 feet, or halfway down the slope of a typical continental shelf. It was an overwhelming success, pushing ahead man's knowledge of undersea living by orders of magnitude.

But it was, for Koblick, a bittersweet victory. They finished their last dive and returned to the surface to the accolades of media, fellow scientists and government officials. They could not know then, in 1974, that they would be the last humans to live and work on the continental shelf.

They were unable to convince powers-that-be of the importance of continuing this research. So Koblick began teaming with many of the same people who shared his ocean habitat experiences — people like NASA astronauts Scott Carpenter and Buzz Aldrin, along with Neil Monney, a longtime friend and business and charity partner, who developed the U.S. Naval Academy's Ocean Engineering Department, focusing on ocean exploration and education.

Two projects Koblick is inordinately proud of are half a world apart, both in scope and geography.

He was horseback riding with friends on the South Island of New Zealand when they discovered a failing 65,000-acre sheep station in Queenstown. On a whim, he, his wife and a friend purchased it and spent 11 years transforming the aging ranch into one of the island's premier — and profitable — ranches, complete with marina, heli-skiing and guest accommodations.

But Koblick's most lasting legacy is the development in Key Largo of the undersea hotel and its parallel education-based Marine Lab. Every year, the facility attracts up to 5,000 schoolchildren and their teachers, who come for three days at a time to learn about the importance of the ocean. They take daily trips out into the flats, mangrove shallows and reefs using the facility's fleet of shallow-draft excursion boats, taking samples and running scientific experiments. For only \$130 a day, children from as many as 40 states get room, board, snorkeling trips and access to a very well-equipped marine lab where they can study their samples under powerful microscopes and learn about the marine world from gifted educators. Since the program began in the late 1970s, more than 200,000 kids have been exposed to the sea and its workings through his Marine Resources Development Foundation's work.

"We've never made a profit, but that's why I keep Jules' Undersea Lodge open," he says. "We need to continue to show people how important it is to fund programs that help kids learn about the ocean. So many young students can't afford even our low costs, we want to raise funds to provide scholarships so that the underprivileged will be as knowledgeable and concerned about the oceans' health as the privileged." ■



Explore with Koblick

Late summer will bring Ian Koblick to Sicily to explore ancient shipwrecks, and you can join him. Over the past seven years, Koblick's charity, the Aurora Trust Foundation, has been conducting large-scale surveys of previously undocumented shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. The nonprofit underwater archeological group has located numerous shipwrecks, including 2,000-year-old-plus Greek and Roman vessels, as well as a number of significant World War II artifacts.

This August, it will conduct an expedition off the coast of Sicily to the untouched site of the famous Cape Ecnomus sea battle between the Roman and the Carthaginian Empires in 256 BC, considered by many the largest sea battle ever fought. The trust's directors, Koblick and Craig Mullen, will lead the expedition directed by Dr. Sebastiano Tusa, superintendent of the Seas of Sicily.

The research will be conducted in a new five-person submarine launched by Dutch manufacturer U-Boat Worx. The bubble-style subs offer extremely wide visibility, comfortable seating and air conditioning. After purchasing a membership in the not-for-profit organization, a limited number of citizen scientists can accompany archeologists on numerous dives each day during the course of the expedition, scheduled to take place August 8 to 18.

Joining the team will be Buzz Aldrin, a member of the Aurora Trust board. While professional captains will helm the submarines, every participant will be given specific assignments in the dive missions. Guests also will take part in background seminars prior to their dives so they can fully understand the historical and cultural significance of the wrecks and the oceanographic environment in which they are located.

For more information, email info@auroratrust.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF IAN KOBICK (ALL OPPOSITE); KARIN BRUSSAARD (THIS PAGE)

Opposite: Koblick has shared his ocean habitat experiences with NASA astronauts like Scott Carpenter (left in inset picture) and Buzz Aldrin. He designed and managed the underwater lab dubbed *La Chalupa* (top) in the early 1970s — the last time humans lived and worked on the continental shelf. It later became Jules' Undersea Lodge, a world-famous aquatic hotel in Key Largo, Florida (bottom left and right).