

seasick or the first time ever. I made the first dive and was exhausted by the end of it. There is a large platform to get back on the boat I was not used to. No one helped me back on. Then I got sick and was puking over the side. No one even asked if I was OK. I had to sit out the next 2 dives of the day because of being sick. By the last dive there were 5 people having to sit out from being seasick. This is not a boat that makes for a comfortable ride. (www.loisann.com)

Monterey Express, March 2004, Mary K. Wicksten (wicksten@mail.bio.tamu.edu), **Bryan, TX.** Vis: 15-25 feet. Water: 49-52 F. Dives logged: 1,200+. Half day trip. Tank is provided, but not weights B rent belt at shop. Despite wind and surf, crew took us to diveable places in Carmel and Monterey Bays. Helpful crew, coffee and pastries aboard, boat has head. Cold water and low vis typical of area. Dense kelp over huge granite rocks and sand. Big inverts B Metridium anemones, sunflower starfish, decorator crabs; colorful nudibranchs and small creatures, some large rockfish and lingcod. Sea lion came by. Beginners froze. Cover up with a dry suit or a good fitting "Farmer John" wetsuit. (www.montereyexpress.com)

Washington

Port Hole Dive Charters, September 2004, LeRoy Anderson (landersonsprint@earthlink.net), **Salt Lake City, UT.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 45 to 50 Fahrenheit, currents. Neah Bay

is the most adventurous and beautiful diving I've seen in the continental USA. I knew I was in for a treat as we motored out to Duncan Rock, with clouds and mist coming down from forested cliffs, and breathtaking surf crashing into seastacks and coastal rocks. At Tatoosh Island, I was impressed by the underwater topography of ravines, boulders, along with the rather large anemones and starfish. Several really huge sea lions joined our dive, and made for an entertaining situation. A shore dive at the Sekiu jetty was remarkable for thick kelp forests which we would bottom crawl through (like bushwhacking through a jungle) among boulders; huge lingcod, nudibranchs of incredible size and color. The kelp here is amazing, with both bull kelp and giant kelp species alongside one another. At third beach schools of seabass and huge bottom fish, made for an entertaining dive. Waadah Island Fingers, was remarkable for wolf eels, red Irish lords, hard coral, soft coral, dense groups of anemones, sea lions, and healthy and large nudibranchs. A twenty foot surge back and forth fifty feet deep was more surge than I've ever seen, and really a rush. It was easy to get out of the surge by going deeper or going between the remarkable canyons or ravines. Tons of fishermen and spear fishermen view this area as one of the best spear fishing sites around. Sadly, I think this area is being dramatically over fished with many boats coming in to the docks with wheelbarrows full of bottom fish and sea bass. The fish population seems to be in the process of extermination. Anybody out there know how to get a marine underwater park

similar to the one at Edmonds established in the Olympic Coast Marine Sanctuary, say one surrounding the fingers at Waadah Island? (www.portholedivecharters.com)

The Eastern Pacific Live-Aboards

CANADA

British Columbia

Nautilus Explorer, April 2004, Ken Robertson, Calgary, Alberta. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 47 to 49 F, choppy, currents. It had been more than two years since I had last been aboard the *Nautilus Explorer* (Nov. 2001). The boat was neat and tidy and ready for the guests. There have been a number of subtle changes: more colorful linens and the addition of pictures to the bedrooms, a full set of towels for each guest (previously you had to bring your own), and additional storage shelves under the beds and hooks for jackets, etc. They have also added kayaks for use in between dives and have opened up the very top deck for sitting and relaxation. A large plasma screen TV has been added in the lounge, which was as comfortable as ever and one would often see more than one diver having dozed off in the afternoon — with reading material still in hand. After dinner (or a dive) guests are invited to show the photos they have taken on the TV or do a slide show presentation. This was a great opportunity for

new photographers to get tips from the more experienced, and for everyone to practice their marine identification. The meals were served buffet style and were well prepared, hearty, and on time. In the past, co-owner Mary Ann Lever would head-up the kitchen, but the *Nautilus* has now added a chef, who did a terrific job, much to the delight of the guests (and who appears to be carrying on the reputation for great meals that Mary Ann had established). Mike Lever has added more crew for this season's trips including an extra divemaster and a naturalist. The extra divemaster is to be available to provide guide services, be a fill-in buddy, or work with guests who are new to cold water diving. There was no naturalist on board for this trip to make room for other staff in training, but Mike gave a pretty good talk on the local sea life one night that was well received by the divers. The crew was helpful and attentive, and mixed well with the experienced group of Canadian and American guests on board. This was a great group of people to dive with. The diving is awesome. More than a few dive publications call the Port Hardy, BC area the best cold water diving in the world and for good reason. The plant and animal sea life is just incredible. Every diver saw at least one octopus and a couple of wolf eels — always a highlight. The largest of the octopuses I saw was probably about 7 feet from tentacle tip to tentacle tip, but larger ones were seen by others. There were also lots of different types of crabs to be seen including some very large Puget Sound King crabs — one in particular, which we found on one of the two scheduled

night dives, looked big enough to tow a Hummer across a parking lot. The diversity of anemones, sponges and soft corals is really something to see. The Browning Wall and Hunt Rock dive sites are simply spectacular — even better than I ever remembered from earlier trips to the area. There is a diverse mix of fish to see but my main sea life target on this trip was nudibranchs, and my dive buddy and I were able to find numerous species on virtually every dive. Mike Lever is very serious about safety and having guests attend the dive briefings and adhering to the target dive times. He gives divers a lot of leeway with their profiles within the time-frames, but I have no doubt he would “bench” anyone who didn’t play by the announced rules. Tidal currents in the area can be quite severe and can’t be taken lightly. We had a reasonably experienced group of serious divers on the trip, so people were respectful of the time and pickup requests which were announced at each dive. The *Nautilus* has also implemented the DAN roll call tag system, in addition to head counts. While our dive location schedule had to be changed from time to time because of weather, the area allows for a number of good alternate locations to use. This was my third trip on the *Nautilus Explorer* in four years. Ideally divers should have some cold water, dry suit, and current diving experience to really enjoy the Port Hardy trip locations the vessel visits. (www.nautilusexplorer.com)

Nautilus Explorer, August 2004,
Susan Carter, San Francisco, CA.
 Experience: 251-500 dives. Water: 47

to 58 Fahrenheit, calm. Ten day trip from Juneau to Vancouver, BC that was designed to combine diving the Inside Passage with kayaking, port visits, hiking, wildlife viewing (including whale watching). The trip was organized by the Rainbow Divers of California, a great club that runs well-organized trips and is a resource for gay and gay-friendly divers in Northern California. As for the *Nautilus Explorer*: I was blown away with the friendliness, hard working nature, and safety conscious attitude of the crew, the comfort and, the fantastic diving! Incredible variety and amount of life, particularly invertebrate life, in BC. We dove entire walls covered in layers of life with no place to even rest a finger! Water was incredibly flat: like diving in a lake! When we weren’t diving walls covered with invertebrates, we were diving wrecks, many with quite a bit of historical significance (and Mike Lever gave briefings about the history of the areas we visited). Vis tended to be between 30 and 50 feet, just fine for us California divers. One site had extremely poor vis and my husband and I just aborted that dive. The weather was good: I never used the rain gear I took! Easy diving for experienced drysuit divers: all drift dives whether there was current or not (only one dive had serious currents), at the end of the dive the competent, safety minded crew picked you up wherever you were. (navigation was easy for the most part, given that most of the diving was on wrecks and walls). The biggest risk was from small boat traffic: many boaters in the area aren’t used to divers, and it is necessary to

surface close to the shoreline. Several close encounters (from the boat) with schools of both humpbacks and orcas, seeing black bears ‘crabbing’ on the beach from 50 feet away in the relative safety of a kayak, and snorkeling around an ice flow and ‘riding’ an ice berg. I guess we covered 800 to 1000 miles days and while we had plenty of time to enjoy the wilderness scenery, diving time was limited. The crew carefully timed dives to the slack tides. Three or even only two dives offered per day was typical. Long daylight hours helped get in more dives, even if they were sometimes at somewhat unusual hours (the long daylight also meant we only had a few night dives). The relatively small size of the *Nautilus Explorer* makes it a great for cruising the Inside Passage. Food was solid and well-prepared, with lots of variety and plenty to eat. Meats were occasionally more well-done than I like. The chef did an excellent job with seafood. Wine and beer could be purchased at retail, and you can bring your own, but their license requires you to drink it only on the upper decks or in your cabin. There was a plumbing problem due to a crew member not closing a valve, that led to flooding in some cabins. I found out the next morning that the crew was up all night cleaning up, and they were apologetic to those who were impacted, promising to make it right. I heard no complaints, so I assume they kept that promise. Nitrox and Steel 100 tanks are for a small additional charge. The big steel tanks were great for drysuit diving: I could really take a lot of weight off of my belt. The *Nautilus Explorer* is the

finest live-aboard I’ve ever been on. The NE doesn’t provide soap or shampoo, however, but you no longer have to bring your own towel.

COSTA RICA

Undersea Hunter, May 2004, David Marchese and Janel Leymeister.

There were 12 guests, the boat holds 14. 6 divers/ skiff; each has twin 90 hp outboards, a full canopy, and is 20 ft long. Each group dives their own site. On subsequent dives, the sites are switched. There was communications with the Aggressor and Sea Hunter, so there was never more than one dive team on any one site. The lone air breather had to watch depth and time. This was our 9th live-aboard. Nitrox was a benefit. Most dives were on Pinnacles, some of which started at 90 ft. We each dive with two computers, one is only air compatible. Our air computers went into deco on the first dive and stayed there throughout the trip. We got Nitrox certified on the voyage out. The class cost \$275 and included the fills for 7 days. The instructor (Ofer – Our divemaster) was excellent, and the course was a welcome activity on the 36 hour crossing. Each diver was provided an electronic locator and was asked to limit depth to 130 ft. We were all experienced and pretty much dived as we wanted. Fairly calm crossings. The boat is quiet. We had no problems sleeping. The generators were also relatively quiet. At Cocos, we had 3 sunny days and 4 overcast/rainy days. Visibility (40 to 100 ft) was a lot better on the sunny days. The seas were never overly rough

and the Hunter always moored in a protected bay. Because of the depth, we only did three day dives and one night dive per day. We dove almost all of the 22 or so "official" dive sites. The crew were accommodating in taking us to any site we chose. The hammerheads were at almost every site, sometimes schools of 50 or so. Breath holding as they approached sure helped. In addition to many tropicals, lobsters, eels, and turtles, every dive had white tip sharks too numerous to count. There were large bait balls on many dives. We saw eagle rays several times, once a school of 7. Marble rays were "everywhere." One site had large silver tips that circled at arm's length. Two dives were uneventful (equal to what would be a good Caribbean site), but every other was full of life. On three days, we noticed mantas at the surface; the skip drivers drove us to them so we could snorkel, but we saw no manta while on scuba. Our two dolphin counters occurred on snorkel, but they did not stick around long. The skip drivers would tour us around the main island and show us all the fascinating geologic formations and waterfalls. Food was plentiful, varied, and good, but not gourmet. The salon/dining area was small for 14. Rooms were nice in size, condition, and comfort. We saw no whale sharks. (www.underseahunter.com)

Undersea Hunter, July 2004, Ralph Baker, Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 65 to 81 F, surge. Hundreds of scalloped hammerheads, hundreds of white tip reef sharks, usually at least one Galapagos shark on every dive,

many silky sharks, three silver tip (only at the Silverado site), and one gray reef shark. Add to this hundreds of marble rays, many turtles, moray eels, spotted snake eels, red lipped bat fish, large yellow fin tuna, and enormous schools of jacks swirling in the blue. Snorkeled with bottle nose dolphins. At one site one divers tried to count the hammerheads but stopped at 137. When we surfaced a mobula ray swam over and wanted to play. We snorkeled with it for several minutes. A humpback whale and calf came by. The captain took us back out and dropped us off in front of the whale. One snorkeler got super video footage of the dolphins riding the bow wave of the whale and the whale charging out of the green and swimming about 20 feet away. Then we had lunch. That was a hard 4 hours to top. You dive from pangas. Your gear is loaded and unloaded for you. The dive sites can be 30 minutes away. The boat anchors on the north side of the island and some dives were on the south side. There is a dive guide on every dive if you want to follow them. The guide does blue water diving and safety stops so you can see more silky sharks and pelagic action. Nobody did a blue water dive on their own. There were 14 divers split between the two pangas. The *Aggressor* and the *Sea Hunter* also dive Cocos, but both left the day after we arrived, so we had the island to ourselves. Thermoclines are drastic. Often the temperature would drop 15F in just a few feet. Those wearing 3mm suits froze. I rented a 6mm and didn't wear a hood. I was comfortable both above and below the thermoclines. Wear the extra rubber so

you don't limit your dives to above the thermocline. I rented a semi-closed circuit rebreather. I believe everybody had at least one "up close and personal" view of a hammerhead. I had many more. The sharks (hammerheads, silver tips, white tip reef and grey reef sharks) and marble rays would often come right up to my lens. It was very important to not move and not make bubbles. Currents were ripping. Masks were ripped off faces and fins torn off feet. Two divers had their tanks drained in less than 5 minutes after backrolling off the panga, because the current pushed in the purge buttons of their octopus. On several occasions you had to pull yourself down the anchor line or pull yourself horizontally along the face of the wall. This can be even more difficult if you have only one hand because the other is holding your camera. That was another advantage of the rebreather. No matter how hard you breath you still have about 2 hours worth of air. They did 3 divers per day. They offered a 4th dive at night, but after the 3rd night we stopped doing them. There was not that much to see in the more protected spots for night dives. The exception is the white tip reef sharks feeding near Monuelita Island. If it happens it is really exciting. They only did 3 daytime dives because they said they needed to leave enough daylight in case you were swept off by the current. They needed time to find you before dark. This left a lot of time for snorkeling. Don't miss this opportunity. You will see more sharks, rays and turtles. They provided a safety sausage, whistle and radio transmitter. The sausage and whistle

are in a small mesh bag. Practice opening it before you get in the matter. It is very difficult with gloves on! Lots of camera space, roomy bins to store your stuff, rental equipment to replace what breaks or you forgot.

Undersea Hunter, July 2004, Steve & Beth Welch, Highland Park, IL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 68 to 76 Fahrenheit, surge, currents. Spent the night in San Jose to ensure all our baggage arrived. Hotel Grano de Oro was quite nice. The next day they picked us up at the hotel and took us to Puntarenas where we boarded the *Undersea Hunter*. The boat is nice and laid out for diving. They have a covered deck so space is a bit limited. Our cabin, was upstairs next to the galley. This was beneficial because we did not encounter any diesel smells or generator noise, which some of the folks who had cabins below complained about. However, as soon as the crew begins preparing breakfast, you hear it. We like getting up early anyway. They have videos and books on board in the lounge area which was nice. The trip out was rough. Get scopolamine patches. The island is beautiful: lush, waterfalls everywhere, and caves around all the islands and islets. Its history as a pirate haven is well documented. We did our checkout dive and the first day of full diving with traditional scuba gear. Although there were strong currents and surge at several sites, it wasn't as bad as I expected. The next day we switched to rebreathers, which we got trained and certified on earlier in the year. The rebreathers worked great and we really enjoyed diving on them. Tons

of white tips, hammerheads galore, plus silkies, Galapagos, black tips, silver tips, marble rays, huge schools of fish, etc. We were heading back to the boat (the skiffs they use on *Undersea Hunter* are not inflatable Zodiacs). A pod of dolphins surfaced so we threw on our snorkels and jumped in. One dolphin swam with us before the pod came back and squeaked at him and he swam over to them. I saw striped marlin twice while snorkeling. They split you into two groups. Our group was 7 divers, but a couple of them didn't do every dive so we had nice small groups on every dive. The other group saw a baby whale shark. We did one dive at Little Dos Amigos where we were hunkered down on the rocks in some nasty current and surge when a large school of small silver fish started swimming erratically and schooling and a bunch of tuna came roaring in and snatching up the fish, immediately followed by a bunch of Galapagos and silkies zipping around snatching fish. Our divemaster had us abort the dive because he felt the sharks were getting a little too close and were clearly in feeding mode. The *Undersea Hunter* and its crew was first rate. The divemasters didn't spend too much time trying to point everything out, instead they took us around and let us dive our profiles. Doing the rebreathers with nitrox was great because we never even got close to deco and most of our dives were full 60 minute dives. We did 3 dives every day and there was always a night dive, so if you wanted you could get 4 dives in per day. The trip back from Cocos to Puntarenas was smooth as could be.

ECUADOR Galapagos Islands

Aggressor II, December 2003, John Sommerer (john.sommerer@jhuapl.edu) Silver Spring, MD.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 63 to 82 F, choppy, surge, currents. 10-day charter arranged for our group. The boat had been totally refit in the previous year so AC, plumbing, everything worked fine. The crew had few English-speakers, but all were very nice and helpful. Captain Jorge was kind, and provided special treats like champagne for those in the hot tub at the end of a long day of diving. Food was excellent, including roast turkey for Christmas dinner, and some great Ecuadorian specialties, like ceviche. Super snacks between dives. Room kept spotless, new towels every day. Lots of beverages to keep hydrated, including water, soda, and delicious fruit juices. Also free beer and wine. Diving fantastic, with huge numbers of hammerhead and Galapagos sharks at Wolf; whitetips, green turtles, sealions most everywhere. One dive at Gordon rocks produced a school of eagle rays, a school of golden cow-nosed rays, several mobulas, and one enormous manta (on top of 3 kinds of sharks and fur sealions). Darwin did not have good conditions, so we went back to Wolf. Wrong time of year for whalesharks. At Punta Vicente Roca, we saw two mola molas on each of two dives, along with many large seahorses. Other sites provided the red-lipped batfish, frogfish, mating whitetips, huge

schools of grunts and barracuda, large yellowfin tuna, and underwater video of cormorants and penguins. Conditions were challenging. Strong currents, surge, high waves, coldish water (especially the W. coast of Isabella), limited visibility and downwashes in some places. The panga drivers and crew are very helpful with boarding the pangas or the main boat, as well as helping you out of the water. They usually pick you up quickly, but sometimes you need to wait in heavy seas while they recover other divers or search for your flag. Dive totals for the guests on our trip ranged from about 300 to 1200. In general, divemaster (and best English speaker) Jaime consulted with us and adjusted the itinerary to maximize the excellent diving. We decided to skip some of the shore visits to maximize our time at Wolf. (Unfortunately, National Park management insists shore visits must be done according to the approved itinerary, or not at all, to avoid too many visitors in any one place.) However, my wife and I did a shore-oriented tour the week before meeting our group (all dive fanatics who didn't care much about the wildlife ashore). The dive trips don't spend much time ashore, and don't go to the best land sites. Also, the divemasters double as (mandatory) naturalist guides ashore, and may not be as good as the guides used by the land-oriented boats. , Patricia Stuki is probably the best wildlife guide we have ever had anywhere in the world. She works for Quasar Nautica; she does both topside tours (Parranda), and serves as divemaster on Lammer Law. Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz for New

Year's Eve. Quite a party . Burning effigies of the old year's troubles at midnight, preceded by a parade of transvestite bandits/beggars! We had no trouble with either Ecuadorian airline (AeroGal to San Christobal, and Tame from Baltra), though we did have to pay overweight (and how!) luggage charges leaving the Galapagos. The tiny 8-seater we used to travel between San Christobal and Baltra was less reassuring, and it was a good thing we managed to send our dive and photo gear ahead by boat, thanks to Patricia. Quito it's a beautiful city, with fantastic restaurants. (www.aggressor.com)

Aggressor, February 2004, Scott Kramer (scottkca@earthlink.net)

Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 72-78 F. Dives logged: 470. Dive restrictions enforced: 130' @ 1 hr. The boat is still in great running shape, more yacht than standard live-aboard. The salon/ dining area is more comfortable than my own living room! The food quality and service were excellent, very hands-on. We had a totally international crew as well as passenger list, a nice change from the typically American-heavy cruises I'm used to. The diving is done from two Zodiacs, all equipment is donned on the dive deck, then divers step down to the Zodiacs and are motored to the dive sites, all within four minutes of the *Aggressor*. On the count of three, everyone back rolls off the zodiac, and descends to the wall where you hold on for dear life and watch the sharks, hammerheads, turtles, and flocks of eagle rays fly by in the brisk current on almost every dive. Worth noting was

the abundance of free swimming moray eels. There was no night diving offered because of currents and sharks feeding at night. Detailed dive briefings were given prior to each dive, dives were governed by Nitrox limitations and air consumption. Divers were picked up where ever they broke the surface with minimum waiting time. Many times short Zodiac boat tours of the adjacent islands were given before returning to the *Aggressor* mother boat. Memorable was the “penguin chase”. During the week, various taps were offered to the varied islands in the Galapagos chain. The *Aggressor* has naturalists among their dive staff, so the tours were educational as well as fun and a break from the constant cycle of sleep, eat, dive, that the *Aggressor* fleet is known for.

Aggressor I, April 2004, Jean Miller, Fair Oaks, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 35 to 80 Feet. Water: 60 to 74 F, choppy, surge, currents. The trip of a lifetime; the last dive may be the single best dive of my life. I saw a school of rays, a whale shark and 14 hammerheads — close enough to kiss. The only downside was the consistently short fills, even after I complained. Having only twenty-eight hundred lbs not only limited my bottom time in itself, but more air would have given me a little more edge in the often strong currents. The thick gloves I wore were a real help, the volcanic rock being quite sharp.

Lammer Law, Quasar Nautica, February 2004, Toby Bramble, Niwot, CO. Vis: 5-65 ft. Water: 65-86

F. Dive restrictions enforced: 100 ft., stay in sight of divemaster, 700 psi min. Dives logged: 225. My wife and I have dived all over the world but our interest on this trip was divided between what we might encounter underwater and the incredible ecology of the Island treks. Quasar Nautica took care of all our accommodations and did a superb job. We were booked on the *Lammer Law* for the eight day trips. This ship is a 95 ft. trimaran sailing vessel that had eight state rooms for sixteen passengers with nine crewmen and twelve very compatible passengers. Because this trip was billed as surf and turf, there were only six divers and the divemaster. In addition, the trip was billed as only four to five dives but when the divemaster saw how enthusiastic we were, he arranged for us to dive a total of ten times. Of course at no extra charge. The non diving passengers were treated to snorkeling and sea kayak trips. The *Lammer Law* also conducts dive only trips but I think one would be missing half the trip. Up at dawn when it was cool and off to an island for a trek to view the incredible flora and fauna — such as sea lions, boobies, frigate birds turtles etc. Then off for a dive, then lunch, another dive and then another trek. During the night we moved from island to island. Diving took place off of small inflatable boats that could have been hard to get back into for the over fifty crowd as I am, but fortunately they produced a ladder. Underwater, the marine life was incredible. Dropping down through the somewhat obscure waters one would be surrounded by turtles, rays, sharks and your reg-

ular small fry, not to mention the sea lions, fur seals and penguins that would swim down to see what was happening. This was my wife’s first eyeball to eyeball up close visit with a large hammer head shark and there were many sharks. The water was warm in general but at times you would swim into ice-cold currents, but we were prepared for the possibility. The service on board the *Lammer Law* was superb. In general we were pampered with restaurant style meals, large air-conditioned staterooms and a well stocked bar with bartender. absolutely nothing went wrong and the expedition was exactly as billed. All you readers go for it. (www.lammerlaw.com)

Reina Silvia, November 2003, John Kontnik, Lakewood, CO. The *Reina Silvia* is the real deal. Having done the Galapagos several times I do not know why anyone would use another boat. The crew was great; they really did everything they could to make our trip the best. The cook, no the chef, was superb. The food was some of the best I have had on any live-aboard, you could eat healthy or indulge. They made the dive itinerary flexible to accommodate the customer’s wishes. The diving as usual was superb. Lots of sharks, a lifetime of eagle rays (200+), dolphin encounters at 70 ft., huge schools of fish, sea horses, penguins, dozens of turtles, plus the land stuff. No Mr. Big but a school of eagle ray/mobula/golden cow rays that must have numbered 200+. Did Cousins Rock for the first time, what a great site, it rivaled Wolf and Darwin in some respects (it was so good we

did three dives there). The boat is not the newest but it is in wonderful condition and the crew makes it work very well. Bunk type beds, which is the best arrangement for small live-aboard rooms. Having done the Galapagos *Aggressor I* would have to score it *Reina Silvia* 5 *Aggressor* 0. Marc Bernardi of Aquatic Encounters did a fine job of organizing the hotel accommodations and Quito based activities, everything went off with out a hitch. (www.aquatic-encounters.com)

Reina Silvia, June 2004, David Vik (DaveERDoc@aol.com), Plainfield, IL. Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 65 to 75 Fahrenheit, currents. The boat is in excellent condition, well maintained. The rooms are adequate, with additional closet space and private bath. Air conditioning in the rooms good, and adjustable. Meals were excellent and matching dining room service. The diving is from 3 Zodiacs (nice spacing for 16 divers); the drivers are attentive, and right there upon completion of the dives. One dive I was caught drifting the “wrong” way at Darwin (toward the outside of the arch), but the Zodiac driver was right there. Our naturalist/dive guide was Victor Mendia, and he was outstanding!! He knows how to time the diving/land tours to avoid the big cruise ships. Shot professional quality trip video. Northern Islands(Darwin): 7 different whale sharks (with 15 separate encounters) including one 45 footer with 4 bottlenose dolphins, “hundreds” of scalloped hammerheads (one dive produced the famous “hundred hammerheads in silhouette” shot); many

Galapagos sharks, including a nose to camera bump (his curiosity, not mine!); “thousands” of fish. Archipelago: Sea Lions, turtles, white tip reef sharks, sea horse, schooling mobula rays, eagle rays, and snorkeling with Galapagos penguins. Wear your 7mm, be in shape, and have 100 dives before you go; you won’t enjoy it if you don’t have the skills. The land tours for surface intervals are amazing; blue-footed boobies, frigates, pelicans, sea lions, iguanas, and giant tortoise will produce amazing photos, and better memories. I booked with Aquatic Encounters and Marc Bernardi is knowledgeable, friendly, and the trip went smoothly. Watch the luggage weight coming back to the mainland from the islands, and “ship cargo” for your overweight bags; it went smoothly. (from mainland to the islands the overweight bags were “overlooked,” the return out of the islands was not). Separate camera rinse tanks. No official camera table/area. We used the dining room tables (there were more than enough tables to accommodate us, both sitting for meals as well as extra tables for equipment).

Reina Silvia, June 2004, John and Anne Maesaka, Goshen, IN. Vis: 30-50 feet. Water: 78 Darwin Island, 71 Cousins and southern islands. Experience: 300+. Booked through Aquatic Encounters; everything ran like clockwork. We were always kept informed by e-mail or phone calls from owner Marc Bernardi. All arrangements were taken care of and tour guides/divemaster were excellent. The crew of the *Reina Silvia* is the hardest

working we have encountered. They keep everything clean, are very skilled and personable. Private heads and showers, double lower and single upper berths. All rooms are air-conditioned. Ours went out at 10:30 at night and the crew worked until the wee hours and got it functioning. Good library of books on Galapagos. The engineer was able to fix a piece of our camera equipment that broke and it functioned better than when it was new. The meals are excellent. All diving done by dingy. Can be tricky to get back in dingy when seas are high. Women seem to have more trouble. Darwin currents are tricky. The divemaster/tour guide Victor was outstanding. He put us down in the spot with the least amount of current every time. 9 dives at Darwin, saw 2-3 whale sharks on every dive but one. Wore 5/4/3 wetsuit with 3 mm hooded vest for colder water. 3 mm and hood at Darwin. Usually did two-three dives a day and then land excursions. Only exception was at Darwin where it was all diving. The land excursions are amazing. Victor is an excellent guide and always managed to avoid the crowds. Bottled water was passed out before going on land and cold towels were given to each person on return from land excursions. Saw marine iguanas, land iguanas, blue and red footed boobies, sea lions, frigate birds, giant tortoises, sally lightfoot crabs etc. Crew of *Reina Silvia* and Victor Medina made it a once in a lifetime trip.

Sky Dancer, June 2004, Frank Goldsmith (fgoldy@yahoo.com), Denver, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. surge, cur-

rents. I booked thru Reef and Rainforest (www.Reefrainfirst.com) who are knowledgeable about both adventure trips and diving. Two tour options in the Quito area are to the north the Otavalo market (crafts) and the equator and to the south the Cotopaxi volcano and another market (fruit and veggies). I booked the tour thru Ecoventura, the company that is Peter Hughes’ partner in Ecuador and owns the *Sky Dancer*. The Cotopaxi volcano is over 6000 meters and we drove to the plateau at 4000 meters where there was a small lake and a large herd of wild horses. We stopped at a fabulous estate and had lunch. *Sky Dancer* master cabins are roomy, have two double beds (or combined into a queen bed), a night stand and closet. The bath is spacious. They have little storage. There is space under each diver’s area for the gear, though it would have been nice to have a basket for our small gear rather than having it rolling around. Most passengers dove nitrox all week for \$200. We began diving in the central islands and there were many tropical fish, some nice coral, and many sea lions. The water was 68-72 degrees and most divers wore a 7 mil or a 7/5 with hood. Two of us wore dry suits. In the northern islands of Wolf and Darwin, the water was 77-79 and I wore a 3 mil wetsuit and polartec fleece. There were significant currents, especially at Wolf and Darwin. This is advanced diving and is not for newer divers. There are barnacles on the rocks and tough gloves are required. A safety sausage, whistle (dive alert), and tank lite are required and were provided. The boat also pro-

vided each diver an EPIRB (emergency locator beacon). Underwater, we saw many sea lions who came close, played with our fins, and blew bubbles at us. There were spotted eagle rays, a few mantas, other rays, large schools of jacks, barracuda, and free swimming moray eels. We had dolphins swim with us. There were hammerhead and Galapagos sharks on almost every dive, sometimes in large schools. We dove one day at Wolf and saw walls of sharks. At Darwin’s Arch we dove the same site for two days (8 dives) but never got bored. Again, dolphins, rays, sharks, large schools of fish and whale sharks from 25 feet to 50 feet. The first whale shark that we saw was a bus-sized silhouette 15 feet over my head. We took several land tours which were equally interesting. We saw marine iguanas, many small lizards, flamingos, blue footed boobies, penguins, and sea lions up close. We also toured the Charles Darwin Station and saw a turtles and land iguanas. The two divemasters, Santiago and Haime, took great care of us, showed us unique features and creatures underwater, helped some the less experienced divers, and spoke excellent English. The crew was helpful, willing to do anything to keep us happy, glad to cook nearly anything we wanted (my banana pancakes), handled all of our dive gear, and brought us snacks and hot cocoa as well returned from every dive. They rinsed all the gear after each dive, helped people out of their wetsuits, and had towels waiting as we exited the deck shower. What a trip! (www.peterhughes.com)

Sky Dancer, June 2004, Jeff & Kelly Bennewitz, Albuquerque NM. +300 dives. 12 th Live-aboard. Weather sunny, some misting rain showers, seas were calm to moderate chop, air temp high 70's, water temp 70-79. We researched *Undercurrent* and determined that most divers preferred the 10 day charter because of the distances. We cruised 600 nautical miles. Jeff was the winner of a 1 week charter. Booked by Island Dreams, Tina, an experience diver with lots of good tips on saving time and \$\$\$. The islands are serviced by modern day noisy jet airplanes, the flight from Guayaquil in Ecuador takes less than 2 hours. You are met at the airport by the *Sky Dancer* crew, bags are collected and delivered to the boat no hassle. A cool drink and quick briefing. Master suite has more than enough room if you don't pack too much. We brought long sleeve shirts and jackets for the cooler temps, daytime temps were in the high 70's. The afternoon began with an easy check out dive to adjust weight for the thicker wet suits and hoods, yes the water is cold or cooler depending on your tolerance, believe me you won't feel the cold when your adrenaline starts pumping with all the fish life. My wife and I purchased new 5 mm wetsuits with vest and hood for this trip, a good investment. Some divers used 7 mm. you will need some good gloves for holding on in the blowing currents; but you could easily hold on or just go with the flow. I worked hard on my pre-trip conditioning — Galapagos is the adventure topside and underwater, you will enjoy it more if you have experience and are in good physical

condition. We cruised during the night to our first dive site, breakfast was served at 7:00 am, the dive briefings were detailed on the white board. The divemasters Santiago and Jamie are passionate about this place; it is their home, they know the sites and will find most things in the fish book. The dives are conducted from motorized inflatables, AKA pangas, we boarded the pangas from the *Sky Dancer* with crew spotting you, cameras and fins are loaded after 8 divers are in place. We back rolled into the water at the same time, the diving is fantastic, filled with new things we have not seen in our 10 years of diving. The panga drivers are there to pick you up and retrieve your weights and gear. The crew is ready for your return the captain is standing by with a tray of snacks and hot chocolate, The crew helps you out of your wetsuits, they rinse and hang the suit for you. All you have to do is step into the hot shower and wait for a warm towel. The crew unloaded your gear from the panga and refilled the tanks; they were careful to rinse cameras, the rinse tanks were changed twice each day. A typical day was 2-3 dives and an enjoyable island tour to see the seals, blue footed boobie, iguanas, penguins. Jamie's knowledge of the island wildlife and history is impressive. We had a wonderful dive with the sea lions who played and darted about, they would bump you or nip at your fins or camera, they would even slow down and blow small bubbles as if to mimic you. We encountered a whale shark on 7 out of 8 of our dives at Darwin. There is so much fish life to see you are overwhelmed. The water was

warmer at Darwin by more than 6 degrees. The divemasters did an excellent job predicting the conditions and briefing proper safety and dive procedure. Meals were hot and delicious. The crew took care of rinsing and hanging our gear out to dry on the last day. Santiago escorted our group to the airport and took care of check in and baggage so no one had to pay any overweight fees. Bring along some DVD's from the Walmart bargain bin, leave your batteries and extra film behind, share some O-rings or spare parts with the crew, your kindness goes a long way in Galapagos. My wife and I have been onboard 12 live-aboards.

Sky Dancer, August 2004, Bob Lambertson (rdlamber@artsci.wustl.edu) St. Louis MO. Vis: 20-80 ft. (central islands); 60-100 ft. Darwin and Wolf). Water: 68F (central islands) to 75F (Darwin and Wolf). Dives logged: 400+. Guided dives, with personal attention and flexibility. Darwin Strait: we had 12 whale shark encounters in 5 dives, a few 40+ ft leviathans. There was hardly a moment when other sharks — Galapagos, scalloped hammerhead, and silky — were not in sight and often there were dozens. The density of smaller fish was amazing. Pacific creole fish numbered in the thousands. The currents are strong, and treacherous — a downcurrent just off a lookout shelf took us from 60 to 100 ft before we noticed, and since we were diving nitrox, we took that warning seriously. The upcurrents drove our computers crazy and made safety stops a challenge... get further from the

walls and then you only drift horizontally (mostly). *Sky Dancer's* panga drivers are dedicated professionals, linked by radio to each other and to the ship, and supernaturally attentive. Santiago and Jaime, the divemasters, inspire confidence. One Chapbook contributor recently advised bringing reef hooks. Well, maybe photographers would benefit on the lookout ledges, to free their hands for short periods. At Darwin, however, currents changed every few seconds, sometimes so strong you worried about your mask, then as soon as you got oriented, suddenly pulling you in another direction. I was a more comfortable with both hands on the rock — even if the barnacles will pretty quickly destroy any set of gloves you wear — and concentrating on holding myself as flat as possible to minimize the twisting. Reef hooks are more useful in the steady currents. The dives in the central islands are tamer but colder. Jaime is great at finding little stuff and where there's such a thing as a bottom (seldom seen in the north) he'll produce specialties like the endemic Galapagos pike blenny or Galapagos garden eel in world-class shallow dives. We identified only 81 species of fish in our seven days of Galapagos diving, but more than 60 were new to us.

MEXICO

Revillagigedo Islands

Solmar V, 2004, Mark Buchfuhrer (somno@earthlink.net), Long Beach, CA. Experience: 501-1000