

Undersea Explorer, June 2004, Warren Verbanec, Santa Clara, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 70 F, calm, choppy, surge. I spent 6 days with the *Undersea Explorer* out of Port Douglas, diving the North GBR (Osprey Reef, Cod Hole, Admiralty Anchor, Pixie Reef). This was an excellent, well run, knowledgeable, and happy crew. Very professionally done, and a favorite for locals, as well. Food was out of this world! Only bad thing was a bit of swell, and no big sharks. The trip is billed as a “research trip”, but it’s mainly educational—guests do not participate in the research. Overall, an exceptional value.

Venus II, Salty’s, November 2003, Mike Barber (scubbamike@cfl.rr.com) Titusville, FL. Vis: 100-130 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limits, buddy. Manta rays and turtles! It’s awesome. I thought the bungy jumping in New Zealand would be the highlight of my trip. Wrong, it was Salty’s Dive Center (*Venus II* live-aboard) in Bundaberg, Australia. The crowds miss this place (they go further North). Lady Musgrave and Lady Elliot Islands are as good as it gets. The crew of the *Venus II* was knowledgeable and fun. The only negative was a half day boat ride to/from the Great Barrier Reef. Awesome service, great meals and excellent diving. (www.saltys.net)

Fiji

Nai’a, November 2003, Roger Roth, Cincinnati, OH. All meals are five star, served at tables in the salon by the

crew. The crew is extremely attentive and know everyone’s names and most gear the first day out. (Stan Waterman was on board for his 7th trip on the *Nai’a*, and much of the IMAX Coral Reef Adventure was shot with the help of *Nai’a* and her crew. Virtually no rules for responsible divers. Many of us dived solo all ten days unless wanting to be taken to something like the Decorated and Helfrich’s dartfishes at 120’ or the delightfully patterned orange-barred garden eels (which comes out of its hole in about ten seconds, so no wait), or cleaner shrimp that will predictably clean your mouth and teeth. There are numerous cleaning stations and finding some with sling-jaw wrasses with jaws extended is always a thrill. The staterooms are comfortable and with individual heads and showers. Two hot showers are also on each side of the ship. Diving is done from two skiffs. E6 and Eanx32 are available on board. All travel is done at night, and the only rock and roll night we had was when we voted to lose some dives by traveling a day out of the itinerary to check out rumors of a stranded whale in a lagoon of Koro Island for the World Wildlife Federation. We found it easily, and identified it as a Minke whale, seemingly healthy though it had supposedly been stranded since February. We also spotted a 12-14’ manta slowly cruising, a 8-10’ scalloped hammerhead slowly swam towards me. Nigali Passage offers a fabulous drift dive towards Cauliflower Gardens with black tip, white tip, silvertip, and gray reef sharks swimming everywhere and sleeping in the sand. The dive after this

was an exciting shark feed in the same area. Wall dives are inundated with anthias, soft corals, whip corals and gobies, large black coral stands, spiny lobsters, lionfish, clown and titan triggerfishes with schools of jacks and cudas constantly hanging nearby in blue water. Other areas offer tons of juveniles in rubble areas that seem to pose more often than not. More critters included as many anemone fish in host anemones you would want to see, goby and shrimp pairs, octopus, Napoleon wrasses, stonefish, bumphead parrotfish schools (we counted 22 in one school), huge green morays, blue ribbon eels, plenty of nudibranchs, pipefishes, leaffishes, butterflyfishes and wrasses galore! After serious coral bleaching in 2000, it is obvious that the reefs are now responding very well to regrowth. (www.naia.com.fj)

Nai’a, December 2003, Bob Rosenthal (bob@pmbpl.com) Solana Beach, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy. Great experience. Stan Waterman showed us films every night. The diving staff was exceptional, the food was great, the cabins are roomy. Good camera table. Knowledgeable staff.

Nai’a, February 2004, Diana Dickinson, Sammamish, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy. This was our second trip on the *Nai’a* and I’d still go back. The *Nai’a* is a well-run operation that caters to divers. With 16 divers on board, it is slightly crowded, but with two skiffs,

there are never more than 8 divers in a skiff. On most dive sites, divers are in two groups, so that there are no more than 8 on the site itself. You can dive with the guides or explore on your own. Rob and Cat are currently land-based with their new baby, and this trip was run by Josh and Liz. They are experienced boat operators and the trip ran smoothly. Josh was able to identify many fish from a simple description. His Aussie-isms sometimes left us a little confused, though. (We had trouble with the exact difference between a “rippin’ current” and a “screamin’ current.”) The dive video Liz made was the best I’ve ever seen. Most diving in Fiji is bommie diving—large underwater plateaus of coral that ascend from the bottom (at 100-200 feet) to the surface or almost to the surface. On most dives, I descended to about 100 feet, then worked my way up the side to a long safety stop at the top of the bommie. Some dives were 70-75 minutes, as a result. When you come up, the skiffs are waiting to ferry you back to the boat—no waiting for the rest of the group. (A safety sausage and dive alert are required, but I never had to use either—the skiff was always right there.) The soft corals in Fiji are beginning to recover from the El Nino of 98 (where they were burnt out), but E-6 is still not as good as its pictures. (Improvement was apparent between this trip and our trip in the fall of 2002, however.) However, *Nai’a*’s active program of Fiji exploration has added some fabulous sites to the list of colorful locations. Anthias are plentiful—huge schools at every bommie. Clownfish and anemones abound.

Every dive yielded multiple fish that I hadn't seen before. (We saw two "Irish Setter" ghost pipefish!) Fiji is a 10-hour flight from LAX. While some people advise rechecking bags at LAX (so Air Pacific is less likely to lose them), the baggage inspection procedures at LAX seem completely chaotic to me, so I'd check my bags through, rather than deal with them twice! The *Nai'a's* office was able to arrange a round-trip fare from LAX of \$1000. UW Photography Comments: Dedicated room for photographers includes power strips. On board slide processing.

***Nai'a*, February 2004, Donald "Digger" Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net) Glendora, CA.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, currents. The boat is beautiful, spacious. Rooms were excellent. Crew was excellent. Food was excellent. Dive set up was great. Dove out of pangas, roll in, pass gear up on end of dive. Except for two dives, emphasis was on macro. Lots of beautiful hard and soft coral and lots of little critters like pipefish. Two dives were in a channel much like Palau with a shark feeding on the second dive. For macro divers, I would rate the diving outstanding. Would have liked more large critters, but we did see large bull ray, some sharks, turtles, wahoos while on safety stop. No surprises, I got what I expected. I am not a photographer, but there were professional photographers on board who were very pleased with the set up.

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Tahiti

***Tahiti Aggressor*, November 2003, John J. Duggan (DugganDive@aol.com) San Antonio, TX.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, choppy. Food, worst I have ever had on any live aboard. Some weather problems encountered but other than light, did not really affect the diving adversely. Skipper of boat got bends so lost half day of diving. Anyone can get bends, but we had two doctors aboard and it took demands by the passengers to get him to see one. Then found out all medical supplies were out of date so could not administer IV's. All of my group had been on many *Aggressors* so really disappointed by trip. Supposed day room and breakfast on 1st day at hotel fell through on Fakarava as they said they did not expect us. Cleanliness of boat rated very poor by all ten of my group. Last day we went to dinner on shore as with most *Aggressors*. Had to hitch ride when transport failed to arrive. Upon return to dock, boat had moved out to mooring and we had to wait until a crew member came along and called boat on cell phone to pick us up. Tour arranged and prepaid for on Papeete fell though as tour group said no arrangements made. Two people were not picked up for their prepaid transport to the airport and had to take a taxi for about \$40. Things happen, especially at the out of the way places but this trip showed a lack of coordination throughout. Diving great. Dive guides tended to end dive when

some divers low on air caused minor irritation. Guides spent too much time videoing and not attending to group. Two situations occurred: one tank out of pack, one regulator failure that they were not even aware of when they occurred. Overall though I would rate is very good. They delivered the goods on things to see and got us to the dive sites safely. Fills were adequate and Nitrox was as advertised. (www.aggressor.com)

***Tahiti Aggressor*, September 2004, Steven Y. Davidson (sdavid8000@yahoo.com), Columbus, GA.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 Fahrenheit, choppy, surge, currents. 16 of us from Columbus Georgia did pass and corner diving on Fakarava and Toau. Rangiroa was too rough for pass diving so we did two corner dives. Lots of sharks, several mantas, a school of dolphins and scores of colorful reef and reef fish. The *Aggressor* is a big wide live aboard with lots of room. The *Aggressor* web site has the details. The boat was reasonably well maintained with a few exceptions. The hot tub was out of order and the sundeck was a sparsely furnished with four lounge chairs, three hammocks and one table with three chairs. A broken chair lay over the railing on the antenna deck. The main dining room and galley were well laid out and user friendly although the inadequate AC left it hot and stuffy. Diving is from an outboard catamaran which is lifted up to the dive deck between dives. It makes diving in rough waters much easier. It has a good ladder system with ropes at the

water line to hang on to when exiting the water. Tanks are filled on the boat and your gear stays on the dive boat for the entire trip. Several dives were baited shark dives. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Gray reef sharks and Blacktips were everywhere and the bait was taken by a really big Silvertip. The food was a below average with a few exceptions. Grilled Mahi Mahi a couple of nights was great and the home made soup was outstanding. Breakfast was toast and scrambled eggs with bacon and or sausage, oatmeal and breakfast cereals and milk. The pancake mix had weevils in it so that was out. Grilled chicken was overcooked and tough. The fish and chicken were over baked with corn flakes on them. Pasta and sauce was fair. The Cordon Bleu was really nasty. Snacks usually consisted of peanuts and crackers. Freshly baked bread and flavored olive oil one evening was a notable exception to the low quality food and was a welcome change as were the seared Mahi appetizers. Fresh baked cookies were out after most of the afternoon dives but in limited quantity. The cook talked about the expense of supplying the boat in Tahiti but my recollection of the fare was that the expense should have been covered. The captain led many dives and I was surprised to discover his Air 2 was disconnected because it was inoperative and his second stage was missing the diaphragm cover so that the diaphragm itself was the purge button. He seemed proficient, although a little hyper and scatter brained, and was a 5 year veteran of the *Aggressor* fleet having been on the *Cayman Aggressor* with us in 2002.

But leading a dive group under the conditions that we were diving in with defective safety equipment was irresponsible. I mentioned it to the second captain, who was also the cook, and he was flippant about it, explaining that his new Scubapro equipment that he received when he arrived on the boat was defective and had to be returned. The rest of the young crew was outstanding in their behavior and professionalism. Simon, Tuomo (Findlander, not Tahitian) and Chris did an outstanding job leading a bunch of old people thru the passes and corners of French Polynesia. they outperformed their superiors. A local lady named Grace was the dive boat operator and she did an outstanding job of handling the boat in seas as high as 8 to 10 feet of rolling waves. While the planes of Tahiti Nui are fairly new, the seats are narrow and closely spaced. I was amazed at how little room they gave you. They serve two meals during the trip and each seat has its own video screen which displays the route information including arrival and departure times along with the altitude, outside temperature and progress indicators. You had your choice of four movies in English or French.

HAWAII

Kona

Aggressor II, March 2004, Sue Taylor (staylor@courier.com) Hayward, CA. Vis: 100-150 ft. Water: 74-78 F. Amazing! What else needs to be said? Our trip started with a great dinner and slide show on the highlights of the

island of Kona compliments of Captain Rob. So much for land and we were off ! We woke up our first morning at our dive site and after an amazing breakfast we shuffled into the water. This is not the week to diet! Our dive sites just got better and better. From micro to big fish (dolphins, whales, hammerheads) to the amazing ones in between (frog fish, octopus, scorpion fish) or maybe just doing somersaults in the surge — we found it all! Many divers on our trip had something that they really wanted to see and/or photograph. It appears that our wish lists were knocked off by the end of the trip! Should I talk about the manta night dive? OK, I won't say anything except one word — amazing. If you don't know what I'm talking about, you need to sign up for this trip! Let's talk about the crew and yes I need to use the word amazing once again. Chef Zach — not one stomach grumbled hunger! I'm just amazed our wetsuits still fit at the end of the week. Captain Rob — thanks for the memories we took home! ! Dave — for finding and pointing out all the little guys we swam right by. Professor Mike — for finding the most amazing Kodak moments and keeping everyone in line. Randy — Tahiti is lucky to get you. Kona will miss you. Todd — your patience is amazing and helps show us to slow down and enjoy every moment. Thank you one and all! This was my first live aboard trip and I'm totally hooked! I was surprised at the equipment problems that I had. Just routine things (mouthpiece cracked, mask broke in half — don't ask me how, drysuit exhaust valve got stuck open, now I

know why the save a dive kit is so important. I also found out that a small good first aid kit is also helpful. Again, the boat had the basics but if your goal is to stay onboard all week, it's better to be prepared. One passenger got a nasty cut underwater and lucky that he did not end up leaving the boat. Notes for live aboards. I brought 3 bathing suits, 2 pairs of shorts and maybe 2-3 t-shirts (slept in one) and one long sleeved for evenings. That's it. Pack light. Bring extra gear — not clothes! (www.aggessor.com)

MICRONESIA

Palau

Big Blue Explorer, August 2003, Rick Hart (rick-hart@comcast.net) Richardson, TX. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 50 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy, currents. The ship is an old Japanese communication vessel. The good news is that it is huge! There is lots of room to move around and the ship is stable. The bad news is that because it was built to Japanese height standards, you may have some areas like the stairs that are low and you will bump your head. The beds are short and the mattresses are really thin. Having said all this, the crew (particularly Lynne — mgr.) are happy to take care of any needs they can. My hot water was out on my shower and I mentioned this to Lynne before a dive, and it was fixed when I got back. The crew is very knowledgeable, enthusiastic and fun. The food is buffet style and very good. Sharks were everywhere. This is a high energy dive experience. Those who

were not Nitrox certified took the course. The video of the dives were awesome. This is truly a dive trip of a lifetime (Jellyfish Lake, Blue Corner, German Channel, Crystal Cavern, and sharks sharks, sharks!!!! All the dives were minutes away from the main ship. The main ship had a room dedicated to photographic equipment. (www.palausecuba.com)

Big Blue Explorer, March 2004, Tom Lathrop (Thomaslathrop@aol.com), Palm Desert, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives is: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 84 Fahrenheit, calm, currents. Last year, on trip on *Big Blue*, the boat that advertized 18 max divers had 24. We were given a complementary trip this year and had only 10 other divers — what a difference. The *Big Blue* is huge so on the mother boat 20 plus divers is not a problem but in the skiffs you notice a huge difference. Also the dive groups were more relaxed on the time limits with fewer divers to worry about. Lynn the cruise director did a great job; Terry our divemaster who had been on the boat during our first trip is great. Entire crew is wonderful We had missed a typhoon by one week and even though our weather was perfect the currents brought in some cold water. My 3 mil was no match for the low 70's water (I will always bring more thermal protection even in the tropics). This is a great trip and is priced right. We all received a free DVD of the trip.

Ocean Hunter, Fish & Fins, February 2004, Steve Kohl, (stkohl@msn.com) Brush Prairie, WA. Experience: 375+