

had lost my 3mm shorty when they took my gear back to their shop the day before for rinsing and overnight storage. The divemaster got separated from us in the poor viz during the safety stop, and upon surfacing we spotted him and his buddy 50 yards away and realized that there were no boats to be seen on this east side of the island. As I began filling safety floats and Lori watched to keep us from getting too close to the pounding rock surf, the divemaster got swept with his buddy around the north point and out into the open Pacific. Lori and I kept ourselves within swimming distance of the rock walls as we bobbed in the 3 foot swells, and we tracked the direction of the divemaster's screams as he headed out to sea with no safety sausages and an air horn signal that had stopped working once his tank was empty. I sounded my air horn regularly, but they're fairly useless facing into the wind. I took out my signaling mirror and whiled away the time flashing it 360. Our diveboat finally rounded the bend after 45 minutes and spotted our safety floats immediately (thank God I have a big one!). We got on board and stood up to search for the other two divers; it took us 5 more minutes to find them in the swells. The dive shop had hired a fisherman to motor us out to the rugged Catalinas with his no-oxygen, no-communications, nondiver ready boat. The next morning I discovered that my 3mm was missing again even though I had gone to the Rich Coast shop the previous evening to return it to my dive bag. Our gear had been carefully put to the side the previous evening to protect it by their excellent, service-oriented

divemaster, Arnie, but by the morning, it was strewn all over the floor. I spent 40 minutes finding an ill-fitting replacement from their shop. At Catalina, we dove with a couple and the divemaster, Luis, who didn't bother wearing a computer, and Lori pointed out to him underwater that he didn't have his air line hooked up to his BC. He took us on three deep dives in a row. We monitored our computers to stay safe, but on dive #3, Luis quickly swam off into the foggy viz., leaving the woman. I "buddied" Lori with her, gave them the end of my line while I ran out my reel into the fog, and finally found our "divemaster" 70 feet ahead — mindlessly exploring in the partial-view all by themselves. The water dropped to below 72, and that is way too cold for my 3mm shorty over a 1mm full suit, and way too cold for Lori's 5mm, even with our hoods. During the week we ran into a couple of thick tornado swarms of snapper, and a big bunch of sergeant majors patrolling over cool-shaped rock humps, and 6 full-size white tips, a 3 second view of a giant manta, and the beautiful Estudiante dive site. Thursday when we showed up in the morning right on schedule and found a completely empty beach. We walked a ? mile back up the road to find the dive shop all locked up. The owner had rescheduled that morning's dives to 11:00 am instead of the standard 09:00 and she hadn't bothered to tell us "Oh . . . I'm sorry," was her all-too-common explanation. The owner had promised us night dives during our 3 confirmation communications, but none were available upon arrival. Web site says "Visa and Mastercard accept-

ed" but fails to mention the 5% fee that she slaps you. These are new owner who bought the shop in October of '03! I met several real cool divemasters — Arnie, his instructor Dad, Christian, and Tristen were all true pros. Pura Vida! ([www.richcoastdiving.com](http://www.richcoastdiving.com))

## ECUADOR Galapagos

**Scuba Iguana, Millennium Hotel, March 2004, Gerry Lauro, Wyckoff, NJ.** Dives logged:150-200. Things started badly, as they could not use their dock due to tides and we had to wait 30-45 minutes for the boat to come to the town dock. Tides do not unexpectedly change — it would have been nice had they anticipated this and started out early. The promised wet suit I had rented (they claimed would fit me — I am 6'3" and 250 lbs ) did not fit. I was forced to dive in framer john's without the jacket. Note to big men: when diving in a country with generally smaller individuals do not believe them unless you have tried it on. Once out in the ocean, we had to take time to do a "check" dive — I had presented my c- card and dive log — but had to show them I can take my mask off underwater and take out my regulator and put it back. When we arrived at the dive site, my tank was not replaced. I had to start with 2600 psi because of the check dive. 30+ person boats were now also in the area. My boat cruised from a remote spot to dropping us right in front of a large number of divers from another boat. There were no fish to behold — the hordes of divers had

scared them away. Lacking a proper wet suit, I started to get cold when we hit a thermocline about 40' deep. I told the divemaster I was cold, but he persisted in staying down in the cold, despite nothing going on (by the way, he had a full wet suit and a hood). I finally cut off the dive after 20-25 minutes and went to the boat. We went to a small island where sea lions were swimming to eat and snorkel. As we arrived a tour boat was chumming for sharks to show the tourists on the boat. That this was going on in a national park is horrible, but our boat chose to stick around, and let several of our divers go snorkeling around the circling sharks. Within 15 minutes, one of the divers was bitten in the midsection by a shark. Being a smaller shark (five feet or so) the diver sustained multiple cuts and lacerations, but nothing fatal. The crew basically took no action toward helping him, other than driving to the nearest dock and getting him a cab and accompanying him (one of the divemasters) to the hospital. How a dive boat allows guests in the water in a shark feeding situation mystifies me. I left the boat with the injured diver. They were ready to go for the second dive after this! ([www.scubaiguana.com](http://www.scubaiguana.com))

**Scuba Iguana, Hotel Galapagos, August 2004. Bob Lamberton (rdlamber@artsci.wustl.edu) St. Louis MO.** Vis: 50 ft. Water: 68 F. Dives logged: 400+. Guided dives. There are several land-based dive operations in Puerto Ayora, but Scuba Iguana gets consistently high marks. Santiago (who is also a divemaster on the Sky Dancer) and his younger

brother Quique combine generous good humor and professionalism in a memorable way. We flew to the islands four days before joining Sky Dancer. To minimize the impact of the numerous ecotourists, most (not just the relatively few divers) go directly from the plane to a boat, where they will live while touring the islands. Puerto Ayora nevertheless has several hotels — Jack Nelson's Hotel Galapagos is one of the oldest and from what I saw, the best choice. Scuba Iguana is on the premises and the Charles Darwin Research Station is next door. Birders will find this an ideal base. (If you are headed for Sky Dancer, you must get from Santa Cruz to the island of San Cristobal, Sky Dancer's base. Peter Hughes' agents and Ecoventura in Quito can help you. The tiny planes that fly the infrequent interisland routes may be unable to carry heavy dive bags. With Santiago's help, we sent our gear over by boat. We dove Gordon Rocks, one of the most famous dive sites in the central islands, and one that the Sky Dancer lists as "possible" in the sample seven-day itinerary on the website. As it turned out, Sky Dancer did not take us back there a week later, so this was our only shot. With Scuba Iguana, we missed the scalloped hammerheads (the first of two groups saw some) but we did get a great introduction to Galapagos fish, including species we had never seen before. Quique took us on a great checkout (with Sea Lions), and Santiago led two beautiful and challenging dives around the rocks. You need a 7 mil full suit to do this dive in August. My optimistic computer made it 68F (so at worst it

may have been 66F), and the currents were strong. I did the first in one of Scuba Iguana's excellent 7 mil full suits, and then switched to my own (perfect fit) 3 mil plus a 3 mil "core warmer." What a difference in comfort and mobility! I never wore anything but my own lighter gear during six more days of Galapagos diving.

## MEXICO

The sea mounts of the Sea of Cortez have plenty of sea lions and occasional schooling hammerheads, though commercial fishing is taking a serious toll on marine life ... Socorro has hammerheads, although it's a long ride and there's no guarantee of sharks — hose fishermen again — or good weather. ... Manta rays are more reliable, and they have a reputation for letting divers approach them. ... In winter and spring there's 70-80 degree water on the surface and 50-60 degree water below 30-40 feet ... Visibility is low (25-40 feet) in midsummer; it generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer ... From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult ... Wear a wetsuit for protection from jellyfish even if the water's warm ... Whale-watching season is December through March ... The nice hotels and restaurants are along the Cabo strip north, but there is better diving north of Cabo all the way to La Paz.

## Cabo

### **Baja Diving and Service, August 2003, Jacob Rosenstein (judyjake@pacbell.net) San Francisco, CA.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 79 to 84 F, choppy. Saw many of the smaller mobilus rays on surface and underwater. No encounters with the larger manta rays, hammerhead sharks, or whale sharks. El Bajo had lots of moray eels. Several dive sites had large schools of tropical fish, and ample varieties of tropicals. The wreck of the Fang Ming had a resident seahorse along with large fish. Los Islotes dive site great for sea lions. The dive operation offered three dives per day. It took over 2 hours to get to the dive sites on the larger 52 foot boat. Returned to my hotel in La Paz late in the evening on most dive days. Divemaster Joe very knowledgeable on marine life. They only run one boat on weekends, so it felt very crowded on either the 42 or 53 foot dive boat on that particular day. No camera tables, but boats have rinse tanks. Nitrox available. Crew and staff generally helpful. The large 53 foot "Liberacion" had many tables useful in changing film. No particular camera table, but boat had a couple of rinse tanks. The crew would hand you the camera once in the water. The smaller 42 foot boat "Realidad" had only one galley table that the cook used to prepare food. Changing film was more of a hassle. No camera table. One rinse tank. ([www.clubcantamar.com](http://www.clubcantamar.com))

### **Baja Diving and Service, October 2003, Bill Schlegel, Jefferson City,**

**MO.** Find it quite variable each time I go, which is a reason to go back. Water: 80-82 F. Sea was dead calm most of the time. Dive site depths varied from 20' to 140' depending on who and what we were doing. Currents were negligible some sites and "ripping" at others. Many sites I would categorize as for experienced divers only (El Bajo, Las Animas), due to depth and currents. Others were very easy physically and technically but also great dives. Average visibility was 50 to 100 feet on and up to 150 a few times. Diving at La Paz is spread over a large area, making the conditions quite variable and some of the boat rides long. The trip to Las Animas was almost 50 miles from the marina and required 10 hours, a whole day, on a fast boat, for the round trip. Baja Diving and Service has several boats. They are generally serviceable, old and have heads. Meals are provided and many cooked on board. I felt the food was delicious as did everyone else...and safe. Saw hammerheads on three dives, Played with sea lions (up close and "in your face" encounters) on three other dives. Two good wreck dives, the "Chinese freighter wreck" and Salvatiere wreck with huge schools of Pacific barracuda at one and very friendly turtles (yes, they are now routinely seeing turtles off Baja) at the other. Hotel accommodations at Cantamar (the dive operations resort) are about 20 miles northeast of La Paz at the tip of land nearest Espiritu Santo Island. The operation very efficiently picks you up at the airport with a shuttle. Cantamar is nice but remote (out in the Baja desert) with a beauty all it's own that is flavored by the ferry termi-

nal and fish processing plant nearby. There is a nice pool, bar, small restaurant etc. Food there is good but not gourmet. Most divers/groups stay there. They will ferry you into town in a van if you stay at Cantamar but want to go to town to shop or go to a restaurant. La Paz has some nice restaurants, almost all along the waterfront. Our group has been going there every fall for 15 years and we elected to stay in town at Los Arcos hotel. This is a grand old hotel, dating back to the days when the Hollywood elite used the place as a headquarters for sportfishing etc. Some amazing photographs on the walls in the bar. Good restaurant. Stay at Cantamar if you want remoteness and quiet. Stay at Los Arcos if you want civilization and a taste of "real Mexico" as La Paz not a tourist city. The dive operator will shuttle you back and forth. Baja Diving and Service provides Nitrox and can pump/mix almost any concentration you want. They also support re-breathers. Very experienced operation and very experienced dive-masters with a good balance of supervision and leaving you alone. They do not encourage deco diving but will allow if you convince them. Have seen whale sharks, mantas, lots of whales, mobula rays there in the past. Not this trip, as I said, it is quite variable.

## La Paz

**Vista Sea Sport, Hotel Buena Vista, July 2004, Clem Clap (cclapp@aol.com), Maplesville, AL.**

Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 Fahrenheit, calm, choppy, no currents. Dive boats

were 24ft. covered pangas with large outboard engines. Could run pretty fast, but needed to in order to get to distant dive sites. All employees were friendly, courteous and helpful. Very short but adequate site briefings. Usually cautioned about the currents but none strong. Dives were guided but not required. Guide on each dive. No more than four divers on any day. Most days it was only two. Most dives were in the Cabo Pulmo Marine Park. Very good variety and amount of marine life. From mantas to very large groupers, huge schools of goat fish, jacks, sardines, puffers and others. One school of puffers numbered over 100. 5 different kinds of eels. Huge numbers of green morays. A few turtles. Nice seafans. A few nudis. Saw leaping mantas as well as a mother and calf whale and a school of dolphins from boat. Hotel was a small, mainly dedicated fisherman's lodge. Wonderful Mexican charm. Good variety for an all-inclusive. ([www.vistaseasport.com](http://www.vistaseasport.com))

## Loreto

**Dolphin Divers, Villas de Loreto, October 2003, Susan Rae Sampson and Buddy, Renton, WA.** Vis: 50 ft. Water: 82 F. The local dive shop set up this tour with a staging area in San Diego. The shop handled all travel arrangements. However, when we arrived at the AeroMexico without tickets or confirmation numbers, before ever joining our group, we needed only to present our passports to confirm that we were booked for the flight and to have our boarding passes issued. Another diver had his suitcase delivered

four days later with some gear missing and some damaged. The village of Loreto is located 90 minutes flying time south of San Diego on the Baja California peninsula, on the Sea of Cortez side. It is an old-fashioned and largely undeveloped site, though cruise ship now calls two days per week, and that supports a trade in trinkets and beads around the historical town center. Our quarters at the Villas de Loreto featured a generously sized suite with bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette and private patio. Grounds were clean and shaded, and the restaurant on site served tasty traditional Mexican food for reasonable prices. Dolphin Dive Shop provided weights, tanks, freshwater shower, cage for drying gear, and a clean rinse tank. Tanks were aluminum 80's, two years old, bearing current inspection stickers. Our group of five was assigned to a flat-bottomed skiff about 24' long, with shade, powered by an Evinrude 115hp outboard engine. The boat was designed to be a glass-bottomed tour boat, so was somewhat crowded. We had prepaid for two tanks per day, but negotiated for a third dive daily at a very reasonable price. Most dives were about 25 minutes away around Coronado Island. Entry was by backroll over the side. In general, the water was as smooth and still as a lake. However, when the dive turned corners around rocky protuberances, tide-driven currents were inevitable for a short distance. The under water scene featured huge basaltic columns, giant boulders, and talus slopes. The rocks supported a light population of hard corals and gorgonians, scallops and clams, sergeant majors, grunts, parrotfish, stone scorpi-

on fish, other common tropical fish, king angels, Mexican hogfish, and sizable, but bashful, groupers and bass. Sea lions swam close to check us out. We spotted one turtle with large barnacles on his shell, and one of our group photographed an octopus. One dive-master stayed in the water, and one crewman remained on the boat to greet divers (moving the boat where necessary) and lending a hand with equipment. The larger members of our group shucked all their equipment in the water before climbing aboard after a dive, out of concern that the little ladder wouldn't support them otherwise. One dive was to a wreck that had been sunken to create a dive site just two days before. The water was still too turbulent from the recent sinking to allow decent visibility, but the wreck has been well prepared to host fish and divers in the future, with plenty of holes having been cut in the hull. We took surface intervals on a white sand beach and feasted on homemade burritos, oranges, candy-coated peanuts, sodas and bottled water. On land, the bird watching was phenomenal. Although the underwater scene was not as lush or dramatic as many we have seen, the facilities were affordable and well run. ([www.dolphindivebaja.com](http://www.dolphindivebaja.com))

## UNITED STATES

### California

**Lois Ann, July 2004, Jeff Hawkins, Tucson, AZ.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Feet. Water: 52 to 55 F, choppy. The crew was knowledgeable. This is a big metal cork of a boat. I got

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](http://www.loisann.com))

**Monterey Express, March 2004, Mary K. Wicksten** ([wicksten@mail.bio.tamu.edu](mailto: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](http://www.montereyexpress.com))

## Washington

**Port Hole Dive Charters, September 2004, LeRoy Anderson** ([landersonsprint@earthlink.net](mailto: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](http://www.portholedivecharters.com))

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## The Eastern Pacific Live-Aboards

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### 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