

customs agents. Anything packaged up will get torn apart and you'll be left to put it all back together best you can. We met *Star Dancer* at Walindi Resort in West New Britain and were aboard for eight days. It was warm, but primarily cloudy and occasionally raining. The accommodations aboard *Star Dancer* were nice. It was a comfortable atmosphere and the crew was extraordinary. They took every opportunity to make our stay an enjoyable one. They were all fun and professional above and below the water. Captain Bradley Davies was a funny chap and a good ship handler. Also on board was owner Alan Raabe who took funny to a whole new level. He is also owner/captain of the Febrina as well. Jayne the chef provided tasty and filling meals, and left everyone with a smile. Diving was spectacular. We unfortunately hit a rough patch of weather. Visibility ranged from great to a lot of surge and >50 foot visibility. The sea life, from large to minuscule, was fantastic. From pygmy sea horses, small nudi's, and squat lobsters to large schools of jacks and barracudas made it all worth the trip. Shark dives to dives where the skill of the guides unlocked a world normally not seen by our drifting eyes. See the country, meet the people, and take in this still developing country. We went to Goroka in the Eastern Highlands and could have not been more pleased. Photography Comments: Having an air compressor aboard for cleaning video and photo equipment on the dive deck was helpful and efficient. Plenty of space and a helpful staff made using photo and video units easy and effortless.

***Star Dancer, Walindi Plantation, July 2004, Alisa Kling (alisakling@billissa.com) Malibu, CA.***

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents. If I had known what I know now I never would have gone on this trip. The *Star Dancer* is rundown and in need of a refit. More than one stateroom had water leaking from the ceiling. The food was adequate but lacked variety and was too fatty. Almost all dives took place from the *Star Dancer's* dive deck since there is no adequate tender or ponga. The boat has a small fiberglass skiff that is a pain to ride in and get back into. When diving in strong currents you had to make sure that you could get back to the main boat or they would have to tow you back with the skiff. The crew was generally nice but not well trained, and at times a lazy. The divemaster was not experienced. Even though we were told not to touch anything, one of the guides handled whatever they were interested in. At times, after completing a dive, there would be no one around the dive deck nor would they have put the dive ladders down. The divemaster did not like constructive comments about her diving or the dive schedule, and, at times, adopted a poor attitude. The first dive was at 6:30 am followed by dives at 9:00 am and 11:30 am. There was a break for lunch with an afternoon dive around 3:30 PM and then a night dive at 6:30 PM. Why the morning was so crowded with only one dive in the afternoon was never explained. The crew was rough on the gear when allowed to handle it. I had to replace the O-ring on my tank numer-

ous times because of damage caused during the tank filling process. The second stage on my backup air source (Air Mic) was broken, and my backup dive computer's face was scratched when my BCD was loaded onto the skiff and then on to the boat. Air Niugini is a real piece of work. restriction of 32 kilos per person (70 pounds) for internal flights but that if you were carrying dive equipment they would waive it. My husband and I were subject to \$50-\$75 per flight in excess baggage charges. They take only cash (Kina). The diving was not good enough to warrant the aggravation. There are other destinations in the Pacific that are easier to get to, have better diving, and better boats: The boat was adequate for underwater video photography. There were only five divers on our trip so the camera table was not crowded and the rinse tank was all right was were the charging stations for the batteries. If the boat were full it would be pretty tight. The underwater sea life was interesting but not spectacular.

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

***Bilikiki, September 2003, Charles Shippam (chashippam@heydon71.fsnet.co.uk) Norwich, Norfolk, England.*** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm. Weather good — breezy but not uncomfortably rough, cloudy but with plenty of sun. Boat excellent — one of the most spacious and comfortable live-aboards, photographs do not do it justice. Excellent crew and the Management (Monty and Michelle) could not have been more helpful and

professional but with a relaxed approach to experienced divers. Many magnificent corals in pristine condition and a great variety of reef fish of all shapes and sizes with many good macro opportunities. Barracuda Point must be one of the best dives in the world for those who like to be with large schools of barracuda, rainbow runner, trevally and dog tooth tuna. Only large pelagics were absent. The political situation in the Solomon Islands is much more settled now that there is a multi national Peace Keeping Force there but Honiara has little to offer so take the advice of Bilikiki Cruises and minimize your time there. I felt the diving, boat and crew well rewarded the cost and effort of getting to the Solomon Islands. Photography: All the necessary facilities were available and every possible form of help was given by Monty the Manager of the vessel. ([www.bilikiki.com](http://www.bilikiki.com))

***Bilikiki, March 2004, Larry Schnabel, Rolling Hills, CA.*** Boat comfortable, well organized, rooms clean and spacious. Food quite good, lots of fresh veggies, fruit, fish. You pay for your wine (\$19/bottle) and beer (\$2.50/bottle), wine all Australian, good but retailing in states for probably \$8/bottle. Dove Guadalcanal, Russell Island, Florida Islands, both divemasters (Michelle and Monty) knowledgeable and helpful, but let you dive your own dives without trying to mollycoddle you. Saw no big pelagics (a few mobulas and whitetip, blacktip and reef sharks largest maybe 4 feet) but coral and smaller fish life very abundant (saw about 4 varieties of trigger fish

and same or more varieties on Nemos). Some very strong currents, not a venue for beginner divers. You need a sturdy pair of buns to survive econ class L.A.-Auckland-Brisbane-Honiara nonstop, then a delightful 45 minutes standing in line first in the sun outside the Honiara terminal, then inside once the line shortens to get your passport checked by some very deliberative (to be euphemistic) local customs officials.

### TONGA

*Nai'a*, August-September 2004, **Cliff Schaffer (cliff@slmclaw.com), Los Angeles, CA.** Vis: 50-80 feet. Water: 82-84 F. Dives logged: 1,000+. Tonga, diving with Humpback Whales. Outstanding photo opportunities. Mostly snorkeling, great encounters, beautiful animals, mothers with calves. Rob and Cat (busy being pregnant, so not on this trip) are wonderful hosts. Rusi was on board who can talk to the whales. Food always good with individual service. Snack and popcorn. Separate camera room with plenty of plugs. Diving: spot whales, chase, get into panga, chase some more and then into water and hope for encounter. Ended up with lots of good video footage. They are poetic. Afternoon diving on reefs. Crew and kava outstanding, as always, with good entertainment. ([www.naia.com.fj](http://www.naia.com.fj))

### VANUATU

*Nai'a*, July 2004, **Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives, Vis: 40 to

100 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 Fahrenheit, This was our second time on the *Nai'a* and *Nai'a's* second trip to Vanuatu. The second part of the trip was to New Caledonia (we left after the first segment). Everyone was fantastic and we enjoyed having the cruise directors, Rob Barrell and a local expert (former dive shop owner Kevin) on board. Several dives were exploratory but we were able to go to a number of well known sites. Coral was very colorful (some sites were comparable to Fiji) and there were numerous opportunities for macro shots. One highlight was diving the President Coolidge, which went down about 100 yards from shore in WWII off the island of Espiratu Santo (pretty close to where James Michener was stationed). The meals were wonderful (you select from 3 choices for each meal every morning) and facilities are top notch. The other traveler with me is a snorkeler and also had a great time. I'd bring with me is a good reading light as the lights in the salon tend to be challenging for reading. It was a wonderful trip. Land tours are very interesting and have many cultural features. UW Photography; Great set up for equipment: special cleaning tanks, storage and maintenance location.