

a buck and beer about two. Among the several great meals were king fish, mahi mahi) mud crab, several chicken dishes and few pasta dishes. Our bill was about \$200 for the week, and that included the 5% surcharge for using a credit card. Breakfast starts at 7:00; eggs, fruit, cereal, no juice, but plenty of coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. You will need Solomon dollars to pay for stuff at the shops and a few meals at restaurants other than the hotel restaurant. Exchange money at the Gizo bank, a block from the hotel. We used "the bank of Danny" who was gracious to exchange money for us. The rate is about 7\$S to \$1 US. Town is like a fishing village; it was raining and the roads are dirt). We found a "department" store a block away and sodas were only 50 cents. Another tiny shop had Snickers bars for our chocolate cravings. At least half the shops are closed on Saturdays and all are closed on Sundays. Danny Kennedy is the operator of Dive Gizo/Adventure Sports. He is "Mr. Gizo Diving." Originally from Florida, he has lived in the Solomons for 20 years. He knows every dive site and trains his own guys. He has two shops, one in the hotel, but the main one is a 5-10 minute walk, across the street from the boats. He would pick us up at 9:00 every morning, and return us at the end of the day. He tries hard to get to know everyone and meet every ones needs. He arranged dinners at local restaurants and had dinner with us more often than not. He is quite the character. The boats (there are several) are small and fast, (dual outboards). The one we used most often had a canopy roof for shade. (Bring sun block!) 10 divers are "snug" with gear and extra

tanks, but we averaged 6-7 each day and were comfortable. Most dive sites are 10 minutes away. The standard tank is an AL 95. They do have AL75s and AL62s. All tanks were filled to 3000psi. The DMs are competent and provided thorough dive briefs. At the end of the day, (about 2:30-3:30) everyone would take their own mask and wetsuit and leave everything else. The DMs would break things down, rinse and hang it to dry. It would be in the boat ready for you in the morning. All your stuff can stay at the dive shop. Surface intervals averaged about two hours, and we would go to Danny's island (yes he has his own island "Nair") and grill some mahi mahi, or have some chili tuna sandwiches, fruit and cookies. A few times, we would go to Mbabanga island, (a small island) and visit Fatboy's restaurant. Grant (the owner) is one of kind. He is originally from Australia. Fatboy's is a nice place and has a mean fish and chips. Sundays he puts up a great buffet with live entertainment. (good stuff) Both are tropical paradise settings, and beautiful. Although the traveling to and from were a hassle and frustrating, our stay in Gizo was outstanding. We had a great time, learned some history, made new friends and the diving was fabulous. Make sure you bring whatever you need.

CENTRAL AND WESTERN PACIFIC LIVE-ABOARDS

AUSTRALIA

Nimrod Explorer, September 2004,

C.F. Ward (cward2@san.rr.com), San Diego, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F., choppy, currents. Assemble in Cairns, perhaps fly to Cooktown or beyond at 1000 ft — a bonus — to join boat. Sleeps 18, 12 this trip. Kept 4 in a cabin despite open cabin available. Twin hull design, typical ride-decreased roll excursions, increased frequency, hard ride in swells during transits. Bunks bit short for over 6 ft. New Nitrox plant, no storage cylinders, fill tanks from system, doubt that it could handle full boat of Nitrox divers. "15 ft" hang bar actually at much less, no spare air on bar (or lite at nite), hangs by rope, swings up to 7-10 ft in current. Room A/C hard to adjust, freezing/off. 2 towels entire trip, no change out. Kudos: Great food, good dive briefs, willing to move for current/tide in heartbeat. Dive guide/buddy as needed. Great crew, personable, knowledgeable. Saw 1 other boat entire week. Great value for the US dollar, safety emphasis. Oddly, book direct, get rental gear/booze for free. Used Reef/Rainforest. Can leave Cairns late PM return day if desired/possible. Not a great/cheap place. Great coral, fish, some sharks and mantas, few turtles — great country to visit. Nobody had a film camera either.

Nimrod Explorer, Australia, October 2004, Leanne Wells (mwells42@wfn.net), Mineral Wells, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 74 to 81 F, choppy, currents. The office is in Cairnes, and as we intended to do much of our diving in the far north in the Coral Sea and near Papua New Guinea, we were flown by twin engine planes to the Lockhart River where we met the live-aboard. The prevail-

ing winds and currents prevented our going further north than Raines Island, but this was quite good diving. Green turtles were breeding and nesting. It was great to be in the water with so many turtles and watch them go ashore in the late evening to lay their eggs. There were always lots of sharks, mostly white tip, grey reef, and a sprinkling of silver tip. The boat is safety conscious. Every diver was issued a unique, collapsible, rigid "see-me" signal flag in addition to safety devices owned personally. When divers were in the water, crew were always alert and watching the surface. All divers were logged in and out of the water by personal check-in with the divemaster, and logs were kept of time-in and time-out of water for the whole trip. Diving was from the platform at the back of the boat, both out and back profiles, and drift with boat drop-off and pickup. In the case of current and diver surfacing away from pick-up site, retrieval was odd: the dinghy circled the diver to deliver a tow rope, and then pulled the diver, holding onto the rope and wearing all his gear, back to the live-aboard. It worked, but I felt like chum on the end of a troll-line with all the sharks in the water! Did not like it at all, and always made every effort to monitor current so that I could get back to the live-aboard. There was usually a buoy or anchor line for descent and safety stop if there was current. The crew was attentive and helpful, with no divemaster supervision underwater unless someone requested a guided dive, probably because anchors and buoy lines were set and retrieved by divemasters at every site and they accrued a lot of time at many depths.

Good dive briefings were given before each dive, but the currents and large tides made things a bit unpredictable. We returned to Cairnes by low level flight (<1000 ft) because of our busy dive log. We logged 3-4 dives every day for 10 days. The food is good, plentiful, but a bit bland. We are from Texas, and carried our own hot sauce. And beware....hamburgers have beets on them. Allow time to see Australia! The people are remarkable in their friendliness and cheerfulness. We only toured in the Cairnes and Port Douglas area, but it is home to the oldest rainforest in the world and has the most unusual plants and animals. UW Photography Comments: Separate rinse tank and tables for equipment.

Nimrod Explorer III, March 2005, Katharine L. Parker, San Francisco, CA. Experience: 200+ dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm and flat, occasional strong currents. Boat was adequate but a tight when full, random strangers of both sexes assigned to quad share (we had our own double cabin). Did 3 back-to-back charters. Dive briefings excellent, crew knowledgeable about marine life. Food plentiful and good. Safety a priority, rigorous check-out/check-in procedure. Crew accommodating to requests, did our laundry for us without hesitation. Courtesy pick-up/drop-off to hotels. Beer and wine only for sale onboard — bring your own. No lounge chairs on sun deck. Bathrooms in cabins, none on dive deck or salon.

Nimrod Explorer, April 2005, Irwin Danto irwindanto@aol.com), Detroit, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis:

30 to 50 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Mom, dad, son (21) and daughter(16) spent five days aboard the Nimrod. Seasoned crew familiar with their jobs provided top notch service. The Nimrod has only six cabins and is limited to 18 berths. My family and I occupied the two lower, center cabins. The boat is a Catamaran with two large hulls where four of the cabins were located. The two really nice cabins on the main deck were already booked. Our cabins in the two hull sections were nice but subject to a great deal of engine noise when the boat was moving. The boat is probably 25 years old. It is decently maintained and the air conditioners strained but did the job. The hike out to the Great Barrier Reef takes overnight. Once there the boat moves around various reef sections with any great journey reserved for the evening. They took us to all the hot spots and some were unbelievable. I had to stop taking pictures on one site because the Coral was just too breathtaking. Lots of small fish and of course we did visit the huge Cod. Only a few sharks to see. I have a Solo certification and was allowed to dive by myself. Nitrox was provided at a small charge for anyone who wanted it. Tanks generally stay in the BC for refilling. Typical day was four daytime dives and one night dive. Each dive was followed by a meal. Food was available all day. The food was good, sometimes great or just okay. The dive briefings were detailed with nice graphics. The crew had many responsibilities. Most everyone was fairly busy because of the dive schedule. I rarely had time to catch a nap. Our five days of diving were on top of two weeks visiting New Zealand, Sidney, and Cairns. We did jeep tours,

rain forest tours with a real Crocodile Dundee, white water rafting, balloon riding, etc. A nice final touch with Explorer Ventures is they fly you back over the Great Barrier Reef to Cairns.

Nimrod Explorer, September 2005, Bill, Sacramento, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, choppy. This catamaran was built in 1984, and whether refitted or new as a dive boat, the spacious dive deck created a tiny camera table and leaves off a small toilet cabin on the dive deck, in the "wet" area. As in some "cats" the cabin geometry gets weird: I booked early and got a main deck cabin for me and my lady, with a full dresser, queen bed, night stands, en suite full bath and a monster closet — sort of a small hotel room! However, the quad cabin (below deck in one hull) sardines four people in a v-berth. Book early for a good cabin. The boat needs an ice making machine (no ice available) but all drinks were refrigerated. Local soft drinks, beer and wine plentiful. Salon got a little cramped for 18 divers. I booked for mid-September, to avoid cyclone season. Sunshine was uncommon; winds blew 24/7. I expected balmy, smooth Western Pacific conditions, we got 73F water, and 24/7 15-20 knot wind in 65 degree air. I am now informed that in the later Aussie summer things warm up and settle down. In a 3mm suit my buddy got cold; my 2mm suit was just enough; most were diving in heavy neoprene, some with hoods. Match your dive suits to the conditions, although the boat has a rack of its own heavy suits available. Whitecaps everywhere. The hard coral was beat up pretty bad — expanses of

dead corals. Soft corals were scarce. Occasional sea fans; standard enchanting Pacific small fish life; occasional rays; one flame scallop and one weed scorpionfish; no pelagics showed. Cabin linens were changed early and nicely. No bath wash cloths were aboard! Cook Sue put out many splendid meals, Aussie style. Captain Jack and his dive staff were most professional, helpful. Demi, the senior deck guy, is a Japanese vaudevillian, with limited English skills; his lengthy dive briefings were unique, thorough, and sometimes raucous. Nimrod's safety briefings and deck safeguards were optimum — the boat does not move until all signatures are on the clipboard. This boat is fine for novice divers, with any dive accompanied upon request. Experienced folks were at liberty to dive their computers consistent with their training levels, with bottom times not to exceed 70 minutes. Nitrox on board. Most of the good stuff on the bommies was at 70 feet upward. Great crew of six. Nimrod does not penny pinch on fuel to avail of good diving conditions; on the ribbon reefs the vis was sometimes 40 with particles kicked up from surface chop in the shallows; the skipper did a 120 mile, 14 hour seaward transit to Holmes reef, with Osprey reef not doable due to sea/wind conditions. The transit running into the seas was a challenge for those prone to seasickness. Holmes had some great dive sites, better critters, 100 foot vis. My third trip with Explorer Ventures (two to St Maarten); consistent with the Caribbean boat, the high point of Nimrod was the great crew. Jack the skipper, Sue the cook, and Demi (who probably stays up all night anyway

working on his theatrical dive briefings) helped us off the boat at 0500 for an early Cairns flight. Nimrod's Cairns land support office folks were great. Don't expect Palau or Little Cayman diving conditions; don't expect a super plush boat; photographers should not be excessively equipped; expect a well run, fairly appointed boat with a service oriented, super-fine crew.

Spirit of Freedom, December 2004, Scott Kramer (scottkca@earthlink.net), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. SOF is still in great "new" boat shape. TV/VCR is larger rooms, twin rooms small, but clean and well ventilated. Boat stable during nite crossings. Even though January is the rainy season "down under" we had relatively good conditions, minimal currents and 20-60 ft viz. Nitrox available. All the diving is done off the back of the boat, reached by two spiral staircases. Exits via single fin-friendly ladder. Two warm water showers on dive deck. Excellent briefings were given prior to each dive, while profiles were left to the individual diver. The coral was in pristine condition, but there was a lack of small fish on many dive-sites. Two nite dives were offered, as were a shark feed and a Cod feed. Crew were outstanding, be it providing lookout for drift diving, or repairing blown 2nd stage hoses or a free flowing octopus, despite a significant turnover of personnel. Wake-ups were provided every morning, as well as dive-time warnings. Boat carries enough equipment rentals for all 28 possible divers. Dining provided by Rob was spectacular. Plenty of 1st class Australian steak and shrimp, wine with

suppers, 1st and 2nd breakfasts, special orders no problem. Separate dunk tank for cameras, but no charging stations on dive deck. No effort was made to help with photographers skill levels.

Spoilsport, October 2004, Gary Krippendorf (gskrippendorf@hotmail.com), Redwood City, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 200 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F., calm, choppy. We boarded the Spoilsport in the evening in the Townsville harbor for the 6 night Coral Sea trip. The overnight trip was rough. Even those of us on prescription seasickness medications and using motion sickness wrist straps became ill. Our first dive was at 10 am that next morning. As we were anchored, the seas were okay and most people were feeling better after breakfast. Wade was the Trip Director and made sure everyone understood the daily schedules, the systems used on the dive deck and in the water, and asked for feedback. He and the crew did an excellent job. The water was usually smooth at the sites and we either dove off the back of the boat or had 5-10 minute rides in the "rubber duck" boats to the dive site. Before each dive we'd get a briefing for the site, which described the lay of the land, so to speak, and listed the types of sea life known to be in the area. The first 2 days of diving were at the Great Barrier Reef. Visibility was about 50 feet and corals and fish were abundant. Once we reached the dive sites around Flinders Reef out in the Coral Sea the visibility was significantly better, with some sites at 150 feet or more. Our second dive at called Cod Wall had visibility that was well over 200 feet. There were lots of

giant clams in a variety of color patterns, schools of fish and healthy corals. We did a shark dive at "Scuba Zoo." They have 3 large cages set up in an open V shape on a sand bottom at a depth of 55 feet. Divers either lie motionless on top of the cages or wait inside. At this point in time 20 or more sharks are already circling the area, having been attracted by the noise from the boat. Wade, wearing a cape (to mimic a super hero?) used a rope and pulley to raise and lower a garbage can filled with fish parts. After 35 minutes of watching the sharks swimming around the food can, divers were signaled to enter the cages. The can was opened, the sharks went into a feeding frenzy for a minute, than most swam off. Divers exited the cages and did a short look for shark teeth on the sand before returning to the boat. An interesting event, but watching the shaking food can became boring after 15 minutes. The next day we arrived at the Yongala wreck for 1-1/2 days. The visibility varied between 10-15 feet on some dives up to 35-40 feet on others. The currents were strong, which lead the crew to cancel the late afternoon dive and night dive on our first day there. To get to the wreck you would pull yourself along a surface line from the boat to the mooring buoy, than down a line to the bow of the wreck. You'd drift with the current to the stern, ascend up the line to the stern mooring buoy, than pull yourself back to the boat using the other surface line. They had the "rubber ducks" on standby to go after anyone who needed assistance. There were unending schools of fish, both small and large constantly circling

the 300 foot wreck. Camera tables on dive deck including compressed air. On-board processing available.

Spoilsport, July 2005, Rene Umberger (octopus@maui.net), Kihei, HI. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 71 to 75 F, choppy. Beautiful, well-maintained vessel. We chose this trip to dive the Yongala after several days of diving with them on their Minke Whale trip. The weather was not cooperating and we had to wait until the last day of the trip to try for the Yongala. The crew was professional and we trusted them to decide whether it was calm/safe enough to dive there. They gave exceptional service (smiles) by accommodating our needs to don and doff our gear in the water, due to back injuries. One disturbing incident on Wheeler Reef that is a "poster child" for successful reef conservation efforts world wide. Crew anchored too close to a large beautiful coral bommie and during the dive we witnessed the anchor chain shearing off entire huge coral heads and cleaving giant chunks off others — it was too painful to watch ... This was anchor destruction at its worst. Though there was a mooring there, they told us it was an illegal one and so they weren't allowed to use it. Apparently, on that day, Mike Ball's operation was granted a permit to put in a permanent, legal, mooring; however, it does not excuse lazy anchoring techniques. There are plenty of large sandy areas and if they simply put a crew member in the water to guide the capt. to one of them, they would have prevented the horrible destruction their anchor did to that reef that day.

Supersport, June 2005, Rene Umberger (octopus@maui.net), Kihei, HI. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 75 F, calm, currents. Planned this trip to be there with the Minke Whales. Shortly after hooking up to a mooring the whales showed up and approached, ogled and circled the boat, divers and snorkelers for hours! They seemed to want to communicate with us and approached closer and closer as the day went on (a testament to the well controlled program). These whales are hunted by the Japanese once they head for Antarctica to feed, and are in need of protection. As for the crew, they're in need of retraining. The staff, service and food quality was well below the previous year. The briefings were much too long and repetitive — a waste of precious time. The cook was inexperienced, even serving leftovers for lunch (that weren't that great the first time). They let their "interns" (free help) enter the water before paying customers. We logged our complaints with Dorothy, Mike Ball's office manager, and she responded acknowledging and addressing our concerns and making sure that our next trip with them, two days later to the Yongala, was up to par. She provided great service, taking her own time to deliver a forgotten item to us at the dock before departure!

FIJI

Fiji Aggressor II (Sere-Ne-Wai), July 2005, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), San Juan, PR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 F., calm. The accommodation, the service and

the diving are the best. The crew is outstanding, as is the boat. There is something for every taste, large pelagics, lots of colorful nudibranchs, turtles, ribbon eels, etc. Just great diving! UW Photography Comments: The space allotted is rather small but, then again, there are only 10 divers maximum on board.

Fiji Aggressor II, August 2005, Chrisanda Button/Rickie Sterne (rickandchris@altell.net), Elkins, AR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 F, surge, currents. Wearing 5/3 fullsuits and 5mm hoods, we envied fellow divers who also had vests and core warmers, but did all 25 dives offered. The best diving we have done. The reef structures were healthy and inhabited by a wealth of marine life. We swam through an extravaganza of soft coral punctuated by numerous anemones, healthy hard corals, large gorgonians, and many crinoids. We saw dozens of common lionfish (two dozen at Manta Rock alone), about a dozen spotfin lionfish, and one twinspace lionfish. Clown triggers showed up on half our dives. We saw nudis galore, including one huge pleurobranch. Over half dozen varieties of shrimps and crabs. We saw several free-swimming feather stars. There were clouds of anthias, butterflyfish of every persuasion, filefish, dartfish, leaf scorpionfish, a couple of Papuan scorpionfish. Four hawksbill turtles showed up, and there was often a black- or whitetipped reef shark in the background. Several varieties of anemonefish and blue ribbon eels. While the diving was excellent and the visibility usually good, we did work hard for our soft corals. There were currents and surge, sometimes strong on