

AFRICA

Mozambique

Marlin Lodge, August 2004, Nancy Aberg, Greenview, CA. Experience: 200+ dives. Vis: 80 to 100 ft. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm and flat. Fly direct from Johannesburg, South Africa, to Vilanculos, Mozambique (offered only once a week) to save \$3,000 on private charter plane. Beautiful lodge, excellent service and food. Pool and 4 x 4 tour and fishing for nondivers. Divemaster is nice and helpful with cameras. Loads of nudibranchs, lobsters, soft corals and magnificently colored tropical fish! Plus lots of large fish. Not a place for the budget-minded, as only other lodge on the island is more expensive. Access to boat was directly off a wharf. Re-entering boat was easy via steps.

AUSTRALIA
(WESTERN)

Few Americans ever travel to the west coast of Australia for diving, except occasionally to dive with whale sharks out on Ningaloo Reef, out of Exmouth. There's a lot more territory out there worth exploring.

Cocos Dive, March 2005, Peter Donahue (donahueelectric@aol.com), Waltham, MA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 84 F, calm. The flight to Cocos Island goes through Exmouth Monday (home of Ningaloo Reef) and refuels there. It goes to Christmas Island, then to Cocos, then back to Perth. The reverse

happens Thursday. It is possible to go to Exmouth, get off the plane and dive for a week, then go to Christmas Island and dive for a week and then go to Cocos Island and dive for a week. You've already paid for the plane. So you get three dive vacations for the price of one plane. The baggage limit is 20 K between two bags. I landed with only one gear bag, but I left Christmas Island, en route to Cocos, with 35 k and two bags. I was way overweight. . . and they won't take it. Des Hill, the manager of the airport remembered me, and waved me through the weight station, explaining to his crew that it was photographic equipment. Losing my bags paid off in the end. Dieter and Karen Gerhard own Cocos Dive (www.cocos-dive.com) Phone: 61-8-9162-6515 This is the only dive shop on this coral atoll of 26 islands. They own a 20-foot open outboard with a canvas roof. The boat is packed full with four divers, the two crew, 12 cylinders, food, water. There is no room to do anything on this boat. You sit and listen to Dieter's stories, most of which are entertaining. On the way to the first dive site, we came upon a pod of dolphins. Dieter threw us in to amuse the dolphins, directing us to swim up and down in hopes the dolphins would come close. He circled us, going full speed, making waves and the dolphins buzzed us. They clicked at us. They were beside you, over you, under you — 30 minutes later, I was out of film, out of breath! The diving was different from Christmas Island. Lots of large animals. 6 manta rays on the first dive, flying along the bottom, underneath us. Some divers didn't see them as they were chasing another pod of

dolphins and avoiding the sharks that seemed to be everywhere. They threw in an anchor and Dieter carries down a second one. No one tends the boat. We went as two separate teams. Karen led my buddy and me and we often lost sight of each other and finished the dive solo. Karen spots many small animals and is an accomplished photographer. She often directs you underwater as to where to be to get the best photos. Dieter led the other divers and both of them carry rattles that they shake when a large animal appears. A dugong lives here 1500 miles from Australia, probably got lost in a storm. We searched for him on two different dives. Karen found lion fish living in an old barrel, cannons left over from the Australian Civil War, and on the second dive I hear the rattles. Out of the blue it was the dugong. We chased along with him, shooting like crazy. At one point, he pooped. The fish shot up from the bottom, looking for a meal. A shark shot up looking to eat the fish. Lunch and the two-hour surface interval was on a small island. While Karen laid out many salads, cold cuts, bread, tea and coffee, all homemade by her, we snorkeled in a rip full of sharks, schools of fish, giant clams. The place was wonderful. Diving was \$144 US per day with lunch and tanks and weights included. We stayed at Cocos Beach Bungalows (a thirty second walk to the dive shop) and while at Christmas Island stayed at The Sunsets (a one minute walk to the dive shop). Twin shared accommodations were \$1460 US/person, both islands included, for 1.5 weeks.

Dolphin Dive, March 2005, Peter Donahue (donahueelectric@aol.com),

Waltham, MA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, choppy, no currents. Dolphin Dive runs a day boat to Rottnest Island out of Perth. It's a 45 minute ride and was \$72 US for two tanks, lunch and weights. There were 25 divers, 1/2 dozen bubble watchers, a crew of five. The crew was pleasant and they buddied me with a man who hadn't been diving in two years. I expressed reluctance, but my only other choice (no one dives alone in Australia) was to tag along as a third buddy. I chatted up the original guy they were going to buddy me with, took him through a pre-dive "everything I could think of." There are many limestone swim throughs, caves, tunnels, and we flew through them all. It's 74 degrees and I'm freezing so we swam. We saw more critters than anyone else on the boat. They served hamburgers, veggie burgers, and chicken wings barbecued on board. They brought underwater scooters and we could snorkel with them. It was a blast. The crew gave standard dive briefings, but with the new dive buddy, I had no hope of a 60 minute dive. The crew logged everyone in and out, wrote down depths, times, and figured out what our final group designation was on the way back. There were no facilities for cameras on this boat, but it was 80 feet long and I kept my cameras up in the crew's area.

Exmouth Dive Centre, Pot Shot Inn, April 2005, Walt Brenner (waltbrennero@yahoo.com), Wayne, PA. Unfortunately, not everything lived up to the preview hype put out by the Exmouth Dive Centre (EDC). EDC is a PADI As operation. Their entire

operation is geared toward the novice diver with no provisions for catering to experienced divers. And, so it seems, it is geared toward what is easiest and most convenient for EDC. One divemaster told me, “most of our problems are with experienced divers”. Translation is — experienced divers want to do their own thing and not be regimented to follow the leader and never deviate from what the dive guide dictates. They use the tables so that only 50 minutes are allowed for a 60 foot dive. We routinely came up with 1000-1500 psi remaining in our tanks. This made the dives stressful because of the constant badgering by the crew to conform. I have to admit that after the first day of diving they did let us go of on our own but the limits were still strictly adhered to. On one dive I was fed up and decided to ascend a few minutes early. Chris was with all the others including the divemaster hanging around the anchor. The captain was livid that I dared to come up without my buddy even though I explained the situation. He even had an argument with the divemaster when he tried to explain there was no breach of safety. You can bet I had some hot words with this idiot. (Incidentally, this divemaster, Graham, was the most simpatico of the bunch, he actually had a real interest in all the critters and in seeing that the divers were enjoying the experience.) This was a pretty expensive trip and we were upset about how we were being abused and ripped off at every turn. Just one small example is that they charge \$48 for a DVD of the day’s whale shark sightings. The Navy Pier Trip (one dive) is \$80 per person — there is no boat

involved. I left messages several times with a divemaster to give to Kirsten about some video footage but left without getting any response. This was typical of the casual and neglectful attitude we experienced from most of the staff. They obviously have a near monopoly so good service is not a high priority. There were a couple of exceptions but most of the divemasters had little or no interest in macro stuff — we found several nudis new for us including the endemic western chromodoris. Their main concern was to keep the group moving. I have been diving all over the world for almost 35 years but EDC is, without a doubt, the most Mickey Mouse operation I have ever seen. So much time wasted on repeated briefings and the most juvenile comments like telling everyone to return the first stage dust caps before washing their regulators. On whale shark watching trips there was only one dive although they did take the time for a loooong snorkel when we could have been diving. Even on so-called dive trips there were only two dives — again time was allotted for snorkeling but when I asked if we could dive at the same time the answer was, “oh, that is impossible.” Contrary to all the gushing descriptions from EDC, the diving itself was nothing to rave about. None compared with the Cod Hole, the Ribbons, or the Yongala. Not a lot of reef growth and viz ranged from cloudy to fairly good. Very little current. The sites were chosen so that none were deeper than 60 feet. We saw turtles and white tips a few times, many nudis, the endemic sailfin catfish, and some other goodies. Not even close to Wakatobi, Richeleau Rock, or Canni-

bal Rock. We dove one of the Muiron Islands instead of the much touted Mandu Wall because, as several of the staff informed me, the Wall is on the other [ocean] side and “rarely do they have a boat over there”. Perhaps once a month. As for the Navy Pier Dive, the regimentation took away all the fun and enjoyment — “you will follow me at all times. We must stay together”, barked the divemaster. We will go from here to there, then from there to there and finally back from there to here — a preset pattern. No chance to stop and enjoy some lovely creature or — heaven forbid — take time for photographs. It probably would be a great dive if one could explore and take time to enjoy all the good stuff. These dives are tide-dependent so they can be any time during the day or even at night. The whale shark watching was well organized and, obviously, this was really their area of expertise. We saw several on our first day out but then none for the next two days. Also, did another day of diving the reef (only two dives, however). The WS trips included one morning dive with one or two stops for snorkeling in the afternoon. More lost diving opportunities. I took a dim view of the expectation that the paying customers (and we paid a bundle!!) would help schlep the gear and tanks into the dingy from the loading ramp, then onto the boat, and the reverse when we returned. For sure they said it was voluntary but it would have been a bit awkward standing around with your finger in your nose while all the others were breaking their backs. This part could certainly be improved. There's lots more but I think I have conveyed how disappointed and

fed up we were with our treatment by EDC. There is so much they could have done to make it a truly memorable experience but, unfortunately, with the arrogant, inept, and juvenile attitude we encountered by a lot of the EDC staff, and the complete lack of any program geared to the advanced diver, I am afraid our memories of Exmouth will be sour at best. EDCs trips are not free but we failed to see even the slightest deference given to us, the paying customers.

Great Escape, October 2004, PJ Halter (pjhalter@hotmail.com), Airlie Beach, QLD. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 78 F, calm. Service was spectacular but the main feature was the pristine, untouched, undamaged coral and size of the schools of fish. This area of Australia, Rowley Shoals, is only dove 3 weeks of every year. The boats are used for fishing or touring the remainder of the year but the family-owned Great Escape are divers at heart. All the crew dove as often as they could and the enthusiasm was beaut. We did not see a lot of the ‘big stuff’ — they were out there as evidenced by attempts to fish! Most dives were gentle drift dives, a few more vigorous. The Shoals themselves, seen from above water, are worth the trip out. Under water, the walls are so pristine there is no better word to describe Rowley Shoals. It's a long ride out so be prepared if you need seasick aids. Plan to spend some time in interesting Broome before your trip to the Shoals. UW Photography Comments: About average — care was taken but not too much area.

Indian Ocean Diving Academy, March 2005, Peter Donahue (donahueelectric@aol.com), Waltham, MA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Water: 87 F, calm. One gear bag went missing from our flight four days, the other for eight days, but the trip was worth the aggravation. Lisa Preston at Christ-mas Island travel (www.citravel.com.au) phone: 61-8-9164-7168 made all the reservations and even took us on a superb shore dive in Flying Fish Cove. She found a pair of leaf scorpion fish, a nest of dragon eels among the giant clams and nudibranchs. She chased my missing gear bag and the jet manager of the airport delivered it to my room. There's only two flights a week and the day my bag was due to be delivered, the flight was canceled. It made it the next day. Marcus at Indian Ocean Diving Academy (www.ioda.cx) Phone: 61-8-9164-8090 and his partner, Claire, were friendly helpful guides. We were the only customers on the boat for four of six days — a twenty foot, open outboard, with a canvas. The first dive, an extra crew member was aboard, Lynn, the local school bus driver. The plan was to swim up current in search of small animals. I borrowed a mask with magnifying lenses in it (it's tough to get old). The boat isn't anchored, so we swam up current in 90 feet of water to get to some coral head ... I never got there. After 40 minutes, I surfaced and chugged up current, trying to keep Marcus and my dive buddy in sight. The dive boat had drifted at least 1/2 mile behind us and they never saw me. The shear cliffs of the island made a swim to shore out of the question, so I bobbed and swam after 20 minutes the

boat returned to pick us all up. That was the last up current swim we made. Lunch was an assortment of Malay that changed daily. That it was never refrigerated kept me from eating it. Mangoes picked off a tree by the launch ramp and water was aboard. There are no toilet facilities, so on the swim back to the boat, you would paddle through people bobbing on the surface with their wetsuits half off, peeing. Rather gross. There were no camera buckets aboard or anywhere to change film, but the crew did their best to keep my gear safe. Lunch often took place back at the ramp. It was one to two hours long and then off for a second single tank dive. Two tanks with lunch for six days cost \$652US for 12 dives, extra tanks for shore dives were \$8US. The dive in the harbor was often 1/2 to 2 hours long. No large schools of fish, but the occasional 3- 4 foot shark. Very relaxed briefings. The crew alternated so one dived while the other one tended the boat. If we chose to follow them, they'd point out porcelain crabs, nudibranchs, ribbon eels. We dived our own profiles, most dives lasting an hour. Aluminum 80s filled to 3000 psi and "Be back on board with 700 psi." The crew recorded our depths and times and air remaining. I came back with 700 psi every dive, but no one noticed (good thing they never looked at my gauge, as it was often 0). 60 minutes were the norm, but we were often in the water for an hour and 2. Bat fish cave had an underwater entrance. We swam in 200 feet and climbed out of our gear and the water and hiked in a dry cave. Stalagmites and stalactites all over and a few hundred yards back, we found three cool lifeless

pools of water. When we shut off our lights, the pools were full of lantern fish, their faces glowing! A bare hand, in the water was soon covered by tiny red shrimp, scouring fingers and nails for a meal. The diving was very good. The visibility of 150 feet was superb. Marcus quietly questioned my dive buddy, found out what I liked to do, diving-wise (about anything), found out what kind of crackers I like to eat, chased all over the island until he found them (there's only three stores) and did everything he could to make me smile. Not an easy task. He was more of a host than a divemaster. His girlfriend from Switzerland was visiting and he invited us on a crew-only sunset cruise.

Lebens Diving Services, March 2005, Peter Donahue (donahueelectric@aol.com), Waltham, MA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 67 to 67 F, choppy, no currents. Lebens Diving Service in Bremer Bay is a six-hour drive from Perth. We carried our own tanks and had them filled at his store in a water bath (dangerous at best) and found out we would be charged double if we returned with less than 30 bar in our own tanks! This was for "my protection" and was never adequately explained. I was afraid I was in for a long couple of days with a dictatorial dive master. Australia is a country where divers still dry dust caps with a blast of air from their tanks ... a dangerous and unsafe practice and bothersome to my ears. Craig took us in a Zodiac in search of leafy sea dragons — an exotic creature that only lives in this part of the world. Within five minutes, he pointed out two. A small school of weedy sea dragons was nearby. We

ended up going separate ways and each of us returned on their own to the boat. We dived our own profiles and did whatever we wanted. A fishing buddy spotted a blue whale but we never saw it. I was so cold that Craig rented me his new dry suit for \$10. The water was not as clear on the reefs he took us to. But there were many small animals. Diving was \$80 US for two single tank boat dives with weights. Air fills were \$6.50 and we brought our own weights. There was no food, but there was fresh water on the boat. We dived the marine trail which was interesting and Craig sent us on our own afternoon shore dives. We found leafy sea dragons, weedy sea dragons, and spent one dive in the harbor with a sea lion.

CHINA

Hong Kong

Ocean Sky Divers, Park Hotel, May 2005, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA.

Experience: 300+ dives. Vis: 6 to 15 feet. Water: 78 F, calm and flat. Had set up overnight live-aboard to Marine Park, 5-7 dives. It was canceled because of rain. No storms or wind. But they ran local dive, in the rain. I did a 2-tank dive with them. No soft coral, hard coral is in bad shape. Almost no fish at all, only a few crabs. Nothing to see. Don't go! I did tell them that it does not rain underwater.

INDONESIA

Indonesia is the hottest dive destination on the planet, thanks to