

We ended the dive snorkeling with the seals. These dives were great, and the captain gave an entertaining and informative briefing. We went further north to Quadra Island, home of Abyssal Dive Charters. Big current diving; I've never seen so much life even in tropical waters. Orcas sighted on the ferry back. Lastly, we dived with Relax Zen Dive Inn, near Duncan, BC. This was service at its best, a small operation serving delicious local food, with Zen-inspired accommodations and fantastic shore and boat diving. The highlight was a boat trip to Saanich Inlet to dive Senanus Island and the fragile cloud sponges at 100 feet..

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for the big animal action off uninhabited Cocos Island, 300 miles offshore. Here are challenging, high-tension dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures. Land-based dive operations find a few big animals. However, they're unpredictable and the visibility is often so low you'll miss them. Costa Rica has great tourist destinations, is exceptionally safe.

Aquacenter, Flamingo Cove, September 2005, Terry Garland (garlandmarine@comcast.net), Naples, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 35 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F. Surge on every dive, visibility marginal. White tip sharks plentiful. Saw one manta, a few turtles, many eagle rays.

lots of small tropicals. Great treatment by the dive company, had fresh fruit and cookies on all dives. For those who wanted it they set up your gear. Had fresh water to rinse. Camera rinse tank not large enough. Boat was slow (gasoline outboards). I did extra dive and the price was reasonable. The trip was put together by Bill Beard's in Costa Rica and provided canopy tours, rapelling, white water rafting besides the diving so good for a group. Food was ok, nothing to brag about. Locals were great and appreciative.

Cano Island Divers, Casa Corcovado, December 2004, LeRoy Anderson (landersonsprint@earthlink.net), Salt Lake City, UT. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 120 Feet. Water: 75 to 85 F., calm. Variable abilities of divers necessitated strict guiding practices and depth limits. One diver could not maintain buoyancy and had to be nursed along on the first dive. Visibility of the first dive was only about thirty feet. Quite limited number of dive sites. Divemaster attentive and supportive. Expended more fuel and time to find the best sites. When my rented depth gauge proved nonfunctional, he swapped out his own gear for my rented gear. The first dive site (el banco) displayed numerous whitetip encounters and schools of tropicals, and one barracuda. The second site (el bajo del diablo) displayed 120 ft. visibility, numerous types of tropicals in high concentrations and variety (butterflyfish, trunkfish, pufferfish, guinea fowl pufferfish, surgeonfish, triggerfish, parrotfish, etc.), large moray. A huge flounder, many large snapper, perhaps to four feet or so, along with numer-

ous whitetips, tuna, rainbow runners, fusiliers, bluefin trevally, and schools of needlenosefish, all swimming amongst dramatic underwater canyons and pinnacles. Traveling to and from, witnessed squadrons of mantas leaping into the air simultaneously. Also several dolphin sightings. The planes transporting you to the hotels here from San Jose International have a 25 lb. wt. limit. Overall the rented equipment is fine, and more convenient than bringing your own. The rainforest tours and canopy tours topside are fascinating and displayed sloths, macaws, spider monkeys, howler monkeys, toucans, army ants, leafcutter ants, unusual bats, fireflies at night, coatamundis, walking palms, colorful butterflies, and were fully the equal in biological richness to the underwater environment here. The zipline travel during the canopy tour was a real adrenaline rush. Casa Corcovado pampers its guests in every imaginable way. The food and lodging, the service at this eco-lodge is beyond reproach and was a touch of luxury in the depth of the rainforest. The Osa area is a real treasure, and Casa Corcovado is right smack in the middle of it, far from other resorts or towns.

Costa Rica Adventure Divers, Jinetes de Osa, June 2005, Steven K Blair (sblair15@cox.net), Edmond, OK.

Experience: 251-500 dives. We enjoyed the resort and diving but had probably two meters of rain in four days. Staff friendly and helpful though there was a limit to the English spoken by most. All diving was off Cano Island, 20 miles offshore. Two dives and lunch and then a return to the resort. One anxious day when it was raining so

hard we couldn't see the Island, I wasn't sure that Hawaii wasn't going to be our next stop. However, they pulled out the GPS to find the dive sites and we were three minutes from the Island. The boat was small (they took five divers max and used two boats when five actually went). Because of weight restrictions on the flight to Drake Bay (25 lb. max) it is almost impossible to take your own equipment so we used the rental equipment for \$20/day. We had no problem with the equipment though if you are a big guy like me you might want your own dive skin as the wet suits were not overly large. (They could fit my size 13 foot with fins though). Water was 84 degrees but there were cold currents on every dive (75 degrees). These were quickly swum through. We saw large schools of fish and 5-6 large white tip sharks on every dive. Also saw large stingrays and the largest trigger fish I have ever seen. Considering the rain and lack of sunshine, the visibility was 50' on our first day and 35-40' on our second day. This is in the middle of a rain forest so allow time for land trips. We went to the Corcovado National park where we saw flocks of scarlet macaws, howler monkeys, white-faced capuchins, a white-faced coati, agouti and poison dart frogs. We saw macaws and white-faced capuchins outside our room at the resort. Also saw an 18" Jesus Christ lizard (they can run across water without breaking the surface tension). On the return trip it was raining and we could not cross a river to reach the airport. The hotel staff rescheduled a flight for from another city and then provided the 75 minute boat ride (in a driving rainstorm and up a jungle

river) to the airport. Plan to be flexible
 UW Photography Comments: Small boat with no extra room or flat surfaces for cameras. No processing offered.

Jinetes de Osa, Mirador Lodge, December 2004, Eruk Williamson (erukwild@acsalaska.net), Anchorage, AK. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F., surge. Family of four went to Drake Bay, on the Osa Peninsula, in Southwest Costa Rica. We stayed 12 days in Mirador Lodge, a rustic family operation setting on a hillside overlooking Drake Bay. Two rooms cost \$37/person/day, including meals. Located at the edge of a small village. People who lived there were friendly and willing to converse despite the language barrier. This biological sanctuary has only five designated dive sites. We dove three sites two times each in three days. Only one of the sites, El Bajo de Diablo is world-class although we saw white-tip sharks on every dive. The highlight was the schools of jacks and snappers drifting in lazy spirals. Some snappers looked to weigh 100 pounds! There are at least 5 Scuba and snorkel operators trying to dive these sites everyday. Jinetes de Osa is a lodge with dive operation. The divemaster was capable but distracted. Their equipment and safety protocol was fine. After we complained about crowded boats and disappointment with some dive sites, they attempted to appease us. We had planned to dive 4 days but cut it to 3, as it seemed we would dive the same sites a third time on the 4th day. The day hikes through the jungle were fascinating, especially with a guide to recognize the sights and sounds. Drake Bay is adjacent to Corcovado National

Park, the largest protected low land jungle area in Central America. On some days, dozens of boats are trying to access one trailhead at San Pedrillo. You can't expect to see the major wildlife when 40 people have been down the trail that morning already. We also did a horseback ride. A day on a sport fishing was a bust, although sailfish hit the teasers twice without getting hooked. Other parties caught dorado. The canopy tour by zipline was exciting, but no way to view wildlife. Our sons went boogie boarding often. We had to bring our own inflatable boards as they are not available in Drake.

Ocotal Resort, September 2004, Diane May (dianejmay@yahoo.com), Littleton, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to F., choppy. Room charge is billed to your card shortly before your arrival date, and the onsite charges are settled at checkout. I didn't review charges until I returned home, only to realize that I had been overcharged. I e-mailed the manager to request that the difference be credited back to my card. I was quoted a price when I made the reservation, received an e-mail confirming the amount, but have been refused a refund. She suggested that the difference was a variation in the exchange rate, which is ludicrous because the room rate was quoted in US dollars, so any fluctuation in the exchange rate is the hotel's problem, not mine. The dive shop was friendly and acceptably efficient, but the diving was pretty boring. We did dive Bat Island to see bullsharks. I didn't see any, but some others in the group saw one. The dive briefing scared the neoprene off me! "If you see a bull

shark, don't follow it because it will lure you into its territory and you'll be attacked. People have died at this site." The land tours, on the other hand, were great. Land tour prices are published, but don't hesitate to haggle. I found Costa Rica to be a wonderful, warm, and welcoming destination.

Ocotal Resort, October 2004, Brent U., Waterloo, ON. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 73 to 78 F, calm, surge. Great dive trip. I was able to see diamond rays, eagle rays, turtles, many moray eels on every dive, large schools of tropical fish and white tip reef sharks every day. As well I saw two seahorses and multiple clown shrimp pairs. We also had dolphins follow our boat out to the dive site on two occasions. nice change from Caribbean diving. The visibility is lower and the water is a little cooler, but greater abundance of marine life. I was the only diver on the boat for three of my diving days. I was not able to go to Catalina or Bat island due to needing a minimum of 4 people. However having only the divemaster and myself in the water enabled us to have some great close-up encounters with sharks, rays and turtles without a crowd to scare them away. October is in the rainy season which has calmer and warmer water and more sightings of white tip sharks. The dive operation and divemasters were great, gear was taken care of me for the whole week and returned cleaned and dried when I was ready to leave. Water, fruit and cookies were always offered between dives and on boat rides. The hotel itself was comfortable, simple and clean. There are two pools and two restaurants on the resort site that had

good food and friendly service.

Rich Coast Divers, Playa del Coco, August 2005, Terry Anderson College Station TX. www.richcoastdiving.com Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25-50 feet. Water 83 F with inversions to 77. 3 mm shorty and skin. My third trip to Playa del Coco, two in the last two years, same months. Make sure you go to Catalina (Cat), \$95 for a 2-tank dive and Bat Islands, about \$125, for the vis is usually 35-50 ft, and it is big water with those fun critters. The "local diving" is marginal, since vis in July or August can be anywhere from 5 to 25 feet, lots of food in the water, and you might be diving with lots of beginners. Rich Coast put the experienced divers in their own group of six divers and sent us out first. In 2004 Rich Coast went to Bat Island, but not in 2005—yet they will call around and get you on a boat from another resort, like Ocotal, 3 km down the beach. Ocotal seems more for families, and Coco more for beer drinkers. At Bat you will see turtles, large schools, and in 2004 I saw a school of 50 cow-nosed rays and 50 devil rays. I also saw what Bat is famous for — bull sharks. Drop down to 50-60 feet and lay on the rocks, and the curious Bull's come by for a look; some are massive, 4 meters. At Cat one is almost guaranteed to see large white tips, cow-nosed rays, and one year I saw a 5-meter manta. You also will see large schools of jacks, goatfish, and this year barracuda. Also we were treated to a half dozen eagle rays on each dive. There were only four of us. Ask for dive master Julian, their best guide. He takes out the experts, and on a local dive he found a few eagle rays, scorpion fish, and two orange sea

horses. Rich Coast is owned and operated mostly by a 20-something females. Owner Jessica Bradford is pleasant but could use more business sense. Other Undercurrent writers have complained that she gets reservations mixed up, etc., and I found the same in 2004. But this year the treatment was better. She got reservations for me at a local \$35/night Hotel Coco Palms, now owned by an American, and one block from the beach. There are better accommodations, more expensive, and Jessica will help you with those reservations. Just be specific in what you need. I fly to San Jose, and take a bus for \$5 one way to Coco, five hours, but if you fly into Liberia or San Jose and rent a car you can see a lot of the Pacific coast of Costa Rica in the afternoons, and get to many different beach towns, volcanoes, and restaurants.

MEXICO

The sea mounts of the Sea of Cortez have sea lions and occasional schooling hammerheads, though fishing continues to lower populations of big fish. Still, there's good diving from Cabo Pulmo to San Lucas and even farther north. And more live-aboards are looking for it. In winter and spring water temperatures can drop to the low 60s. Visibility is lower (25-40 feet), but generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer, when the water warms to the 80s in the Sea of Cortez. From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult. Wear a skin

or wetsuit for protection from jellyfish. Socorro Island has hammerheads and mantas, though it's a long ride from Cabo and there's no guarantee of sharks or good weather. Manta sightings are reliable and they have a reputation for letting divers approach. One can find good accommodations and food at all the dive venues north of Cabo. Farther south, Pacific diving is dulled by low visibility.

Acapulco

Swiss Divers, June 2005, Al Schmauder (al_schmauder@hotmail.com), Olympia, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. My wife and I did not expect great diving in Acapulco, but we had an excellent guide who found sea horses and octopus. Swiss Divers have two good dive boats. The trip from the dive shop to the dive site was 10 minutes. There were only three divers and the guide. We dived until one diver hit 500 psi. Very safe procedures. Just a fun recreational dive 50-60 feet. Night dive was uneventful.

Cabo San Lucas and North

Amigos Del Mar, Deep Blue, Cabo San Lucas, May 2005, Conrad Kantor (scubabuba@hotmail.com), Westlake Village, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. vis: 30 to Feet. Water: to 60 F., currents. Started with Amigos Del Mar but lost confidence after divemaster ignored and lost divers underwater. Some divers running low on air were ignored. Strong current did not help.