

a 38' skiff that is hauled up longitudinally into the stern of the NE itself. You actually dive from the skiff, which has 24 dive stations that are more roomy than on most day boats. Upon arrival, you set up your dive gear on a tank at your station, throw the odds and ends in a large bin below. Tanks are filled on the skiff. The skiff is well designed. It has minimal freeboard — about a foot. It has hand rails running the length of the skiff for divers to grab while waiting to climb out of the water. Boarding from the NE is a snap. Even if the skip has been launched, the decks of the two boats are precisely level. When exiting the water, there are three ladders, two usable while wearing fins. But mostly divers let the crew remove their fins while in the water and climbed the third, more conventional ladder. Everything is built around the divers' convenience, not the crew's. So you can use aluminum or steel tanks, DIN or yoke, air, Nitrox or Trimix (with prior notice), singles, doubles, or rebreathers. The crew will buddy up single divers if they want, but most of the serious photographers dived solo. The only limitations relate to currents: all diving is at "slack" as the tides change and are generally limited to 60 minutes. Any longer and the current become hazardous. The water is cold, so dry suits are de rigueur. Since for me the combination of DUI FLX and WeeZle Wear—with a mysterious 15 lbs. that appeared around my waistline—made lifting foot to knee an effort, The crew was quick to help me don my fins. I was the "baby" on this trip with just 65 dives to my credit. The next fewest were 180, but most divers counted their dives

by the thousands. About half were back for their second, fourth or eleventh time. Captain Mike Lever knows what divers need, where the best sites are, when to dive them, and how to build an itinerary that provides lots of diving (3-4 dives per day, even a night dive) while not seeming rushed or hurried — not an easy trick when 24 divers don and remove dry suits for each dive. The crew is fantastic: knowledgeable (all have degrees in marine biology!), helpful, and skilled. British Columbia diving is challenging and there's little else to do on board (though they did try to break the routine with a crab cookout on the beach, a trek up a salmon run, and a visit to a quaint fishing village). The Alaska dive trips have more on-shore excursions and attract about 30% nondivers; the NE moves to Mexico for the winter where wetsuits are the rule and currents are infrequent. The trip was awesome. Photography Comments: two large rinse tanks for cameras only and ample dry shelf space for the largest rigs. Also, many AC outlets available for battery charging. (Twelve chairs, no waiting.) Two computers set up for downloading pics and editing.

## COSTA RICA

### Cocos Island

**Sea Hunter, August 2005, LeRoy Anderson (landersonsprint@earthlink.net), Salt Lake City, UT.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 70 to 80 F, choppy. Special rebreather expedition sponsored by Fathoms magazine and managed by Brett Gilliam. Very well set up and

organized, the crossings to Cocos and Malpelo islands were smooth and pleasant, though this is not always the case. Malpelo island is dramatic and visually stunning. Tons of moray eels at Malpelo. Cocos island is beautiful top-side. Under the water, it's a real treasure, with magnificent amounts of tropical fish, huge schools of jacks, hammerheads, and whitetips. The mobula rays are interesting. Favorite site, Dirty Rock with all its variety, followed by Bajo Alcyone for its tuna and hammerheads. It was great to snorkel with dolphins, snorkel with silky sharks, dive with hammerheads, Galapagos sharks, black-tip sharks, whitetip sharks, all on the same day. One group had a whale shark encounter. Rebreathers enabled closer animal interactions, and extended bottom times. Not one rebreather malfunction for anyone, which speaks for the quality of the maintenance by the crew. We were all supplied with safety sausages, whistles, and homing beacons for safety. The cooks, divemasters, boatmen all were uniformly first class, and a DVD of the trip was made for us all which has been greatly enjoyed by my friends and family since returning home.

**Undersea Hunter, June 2004, Lauren Henderson, Kona, HI.** Experience: 450 dives. Vis: 60-100 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F., mostly cloudy with frequent rain showers, some heavy. Marble rays and white tips are so abundant that you barely notice their presence after the first day. Hammerheads on most dives and often in huge schools. We had 4 of 7 divers on rebreathers so with so few bubbles the sharks were coming in close. Two separate encounters

with whale sharks, females about 25 ft estimated. They made several slow passes. Other treats were eagle rays feeding in the sand, numerous species of tropicals, lobster, huge moray eels, and my favorite the tornado looking schools of jacks by the thousands. The dive drill is a morning dive at 8, a second dive around 10:30, lunch, afternoon dive about 2:30 and a night dive at 6 followed by dinner. The night dive is a repeated site with hunting white tips. Fun, but once was enough. With currents and surge, three dives a day was physically draining so after the 3rd dive I was ready to relax with a movie or viewing my day's shots. The Undersea Hunter has spacious cabins and a large dive deck. The lounge/dining area was a little small and cramped when we all wanted to watch a video but manageable. They served the food family style and chef Pedro did a great job accommodating dietary needs, preparing either vegetarian meals, fish or chicken for me on the nights that beef or pork was the main dish. Snacks of pastries, chicken soup, or hot chocolate were available after every dive. Dry towels were waiting after the dives and an on deck shower was available. They assigned every photographer his own camera compartment with many electrical outlets for charging batteries. There was also a large camera only rinse bin. The divemasters, Ofer and Nico were a lot of fun and knowledgeable about the dive sites and water conditions. The briefings were detailed. The panga drivers were excellent in finding divers as they surfaced around the sea mounts in often choppy ocean conditions. They gave every diver a safety kit

with a sausage and whistle along with a special tracking signal device. Nitrox \$120 a week. The diving is deep and with 7 days of repetitive diving most air computers would be too limiting. Several guests took the rebreather course and liked the lack of bubbles and extra bottom time. The 36 hr. crossings can be rough and many guests were seasick, bring patches and Dramamine even if you think you are seaworthy. Once the boat arrives at Cocos it stays in calm waters for 7 days.

**Undersea Hunter, November 2004,  
Peter Belden, San Francisco, CA.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, choppy, no currents. Cocos is only for experienced divers. The dives are all deep, currents can be ripping, safety stops can become blue water drifts and the swell at the surface can be significant. Everyone on board dove Nitrox the whole trip. It's a must given the depths. However for those with the necessary skills and experience it is the destination of a lifetime: schools of hammerheads, night dives with feeding frenzied white tips sharks, plus many sightings of black tips, silkies, Galapagos sharks, and even silvertips. One day we had a short but magical snorkeling encounter with passing dolphins. Saw two mobula mantas, some yellowfin tuna, big wahoo, schools of big-eye trevally that literally blocked out the sun, tens of marbled rays together, batfish, lobster, octopi, small schools of eagle rays, lots of eels and snake eels, and another diver saw a sailfish. The sheer number of fish is amazing. The national park protection really shows in how plentiful the fish life is compared to many other

destinations whose fish have been decimated by nearby fishing. Three dives per day and then generally a fourth night dive. The hammerheads are shy so the dive routine is to descend to 90 feet, grab the bottom, hold completely still and then wait for them to emerge from the blue. Even a small fin flutter can suddenly cause the sharks to vanish. They are skittish and to get a close shot when the sharks approach you need to hold in the bubbles. Only on 2 dives out of 20 was the current bad. But on those 2 dives the current was an overpowering 5 knots, our exhaled bubbles moving sideways not up, and you were holding on to the rock with a full hand. Therefore gloves are a must in Cocos. Those without gloves cut their hands on the barnacles as they gripped for life fighting the current, and no one wants their hands cut up where there are 6 species of shark constantly in the vicinity. We were also lucky to have calm seas. It's easy to jump into 4 foot swell but climbing out of it into a skiff is much harder. Apparently larger swell and unpredictable currents are the norm. The Undersea Hunter is the highest quality live-aboard. Excellent crew, good food, and nice rooms each with its own bathroom. There is even a warm fresh water shower on the dive deck. All divers are given an extra large safety sausage, a small signaling light, a whistle and an EPIRB (emergency position indicating radio beacon). Divers have been lost at sea at Cocos, although never by the Undersea Hunter. Our panga driver reported having "picked up" several divers who had drifted beyond sight from the Aggressor... I had also heard that the Aggressor dinghies

were hard to climb back into and upon seeing them I now know why. I prefer the much larger pangas with ladders and tank racks that are used by the Undersea Hunter. Rebreather courses are apparently no longer offered on board unless there is a group request. We were able to get to the hammerheads despite being on open circuit (not using rebreathers). Bring a sweater and warm hat for potentially cool evenings. The other 8 divers on the boat were from Germany, France, Israel and one from the U.S. All but 2 were either assistant instructors or commercial divers. [www.underseahunter.com](http://www.underseahunter.com). UW Photography Comments: E6 processing no longer offered. Each photographer is given their own camera cubby. Large rinse tank shared. Dry air available to blow dry camera gear. Crew experienced with photography and videography.

## ECUADOR

### Galapagos Islands

**Aggressor I, December 2004, Scott Johnson (Scottyj96@aol.com), Palm Springs, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 65 Feet. Water: 68 to 77 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. Galapagos Aggressor I is superb! Excellent service, food, accommodations, courtesy of staff etc. Nothing but the best.....well one thing needs to be improved... the wine, a bad Chilean blend. Excellent group on board, all from USA except a Swiss couple. We had a great time together. Day One: Landed in San Cristobal, check out dive. Water about 72 degrees, Yikes! (I dive the South Pacific where temps are

82 degrees). Visibility about 15 feet. One seal made a brief appearance. You need to be over weighted as you do backward rolls off dinghies and straight down. Day Two: North Seymour. Bad night, rough boat ride to Baltra. Cold water, about 72 degrees, wore my hood, vest and gloves. On the first dive visibility was about 30' greenish color, saw a seal and not much else. Swam against a current, burnt through my air. People who could stay the extra 10 minutes saw white gips. Sick for the second dive. Day Three: Wolf, a 12-hour (or more) ride from N. Seymour. The waters were not as rough. Water about 77 degrees, 60' visibility and blue. First dive, saw three hammerheads, but not much else. Second dive, wall of hammerheads a hundred or more, Excellent dive. Third dive same as first. Fourth dive sick again. Day Four: Darwin. Finally calm waters, sunny and bright blue waters! First dive, water about 77 degrees. No whale sharks, they say this is the second year in a row they have not seen whale sharks in December. Saw a couple hammerheads, which was about it. Dive two, similar to the first dive but I sat in sandy area and had three hammerheads that kept circling me and would come within four feet to check me out. Great dive! Then back to Wolf for two more dives. Dive one at Wolf was only about 40' visibility not much to see and sick for fourth dive. Day Five: Cabo Marshall. First dive, water 75 degrees. There was a school of grunts that must have been in the tens of thousands covering the reef. Looking up you saw a school of barracuda (about 100) and a seal swimming through to break them up. Saw mantas, seals, sharks etc. great dive!