

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!

Dive two, not as impressive as dive one but a lots of small schools of fish. Day Six, Gordon rocks, one dive. Almost everyone's least favorite. Cold water maybe 70 degrees. Rough waters, strong currents and maybe 30 feet visibility. After fighting to get through the surface current, you dealt with many different currents (a washing machine). I could have dealt with the current if there was visibility. Saw three hammerheads I was at 67 feet they were at 90. Forget it.... surface. This diving is not for the beginner. Your dive masters (guides) tell you they are not baby sitters! You need to hang with you buddy or with the group and make you way to the top when you get low on air. A few times we swam against the current and I burned my air. Where I believe we could have had a great drift dive. Frustrating as most of my dives were 35 to 40 minutes. Aggressor dingy drivers would take me back to the boat when I came up early, as I would get sea sick sitting in the dingy. All dives are from a dingy and they find you. You are given a folding dive flag (that goes about 5' or 6' high) and a waterproof radiophone. Just in case you end up in open water! Regarding rough waters they can be and are if you have a problem of motion sickness, you will be sick. I refused to break out my 6.5mm as I do most of my diving in the South Pacific and have not worn anything but a 2-1 mm shorty for 5 years. brought an 3-2 with a hood and vest. I survived and was just OK. But their recommendation is a 5 mm — probably the best bet. I read suggestions to bring Kevlar gloves. I never found the rocks sharp more of the opposite slippery except the barnacles, which you do

not touch. I suggest bring a reef hook for the strong currents. I would have to rate the diving as a "C" trip. There were 3 couples on board that had been there before 3, 5 and 10 years ago. One couple said the land and marine life were 10 fold during the same week in the years past and there were always whale sharks. I had only three dives that I saw what I expected. Maybe they were on vacation!

**Aggressor, June 2005, Michael Foust (drfoust1@comcast.net), Santa Ana, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 72 to 80 F., currents. I have been on three previous live-boards and service, food and space the Galapagos Aggressor was the best. Staff was outstanding; picking us up at the airport in Ecuador, transition to hotel and transition back to the airport. Same on the return—takes all the stress out of it. The cabin was comfortable, the bathroom good, and service/food plentiful. I didn't need special gloves as I'd been urged to get, the 3 ml were plenty; I used a 4 ml suit with a 4 ml hooded vest that was essential at the southern stops, but not needed at Darwin and Wolf. plenty of hammerheads, dolphins, turtles, Galapagos, silky and a few white tips. No whale shark but the orcas scared everything away after the first day so that might have included the whale sharks. Gordon Rock can be skipped and there were other dives where I had such poor visibility it was of little value, but when the dives were good they were great, including playful plentiful sea lions. I got decent video and fair stills because the conditions are challenging. 75% of the divers were making their 3rd or more trip here so

the divers were good but the staff still did everything well.

**Deep Blue, June 2005, John & Debra Barrett, San Patricio, TX.** Experience: 750+. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 73 F south and 77 F Wolf/Darwin. Deep Blue is a superb new addition to the Galapagos scene. I have ridden all the luxury dive boats in the Galapagos, and none matches the stability of Deep Blue in a rough crossing to the northern islands. The yacht is longer, wider, and does not display the top heavy appearance of some of the competition. The crew is well organized. Chef Roberto provided excellent and varied meals. Steward Erik met our every need for meals and drinks, and he was always slinging gear on the dive deck. Pedro refused to let divers pull on or off bulky wetsuits unassisted. As is evident to anybody who reads the ChapBook the main event in Galapagos during the June – October whale shark season at Darwin Arch. Ken at Galapagos Adventures organized a Darwin-centric itinerary that included 3 2 diving days at Wolf/Darwin. We got up close and personal with the big mommas on 70 percent of our dives. Head dive guide Antonio, and his eagle eyed assistant Juan Carlos were adept at finding these amazing fish while maintaining a safe and efficient diving operation. When whale sharks did not grace us we tried not to be disappointed with Galapagos sharks, white tip sharks, hammers, duskies, and silkies. Turtles everywhere, huge bait balls, eagle rays, etc. The place is unbelievable! Deep Blue charges for all alcoholic beverages while the competition does not, but for the price differential (\$800 less than the other guys)

you would have to drink one heck of a lot to make up the difference. Darwin Arch is a world class dive site and Deep Blue is a world class dive yacht.

**Deep Blue, July 2005, Dennis Marguet, Pleasanton, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 60 to 78 F., choppy, surge. The bad, the other group got to see the Whale sharks, everything else was above good. Because our panga did not see the whale sharks, the boat stayed an extra day at Darwin for us to see one. The viz was poor, at times a murky 40 feet. I talked to guys in the airport who went on the trip after we did and they saw 25 whale sharks with five on one dive and viz was up to 100 ft! You can never make an appointment with a fish! The crew was excellent but some had problems with English, but there were plenty to help. Two dive masters, one for each panga; everyone stayed with the same panga because they wanted to stay with friends. The boat was like new. The best rooms are downstairs, but the other rooms are more than I've seen on other liveboards. Rooms had private baths and showers and beds were made up every day. Robes provided. For advanced divers or divers prepared to dive in currents and surge plus comfortable going out into the blue to see the big schools of hammerheads and whale sharks. Got to snorkel with dolphins that came around the pangas and they once dive bombed the hammerheads that we were watching on a dive in a protective way. This is not a place for pretty corals and pretty small fish, it's for big fish and lot's of them. Land excursions were interesting and we saw the mating rituals of vari-

ous birds along with birds on eggs and baby chicks. Saw lots of marine iguanas and even penguins. Food was excellent. I've been on well over 25 different liveboards around the world and this is at the top of the list.

**Deep Blue, July 2005, David White-side (dwhite95865@hotmail.com), Sacramento, CA.** Experience: 200 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 feet. Water: 65 to 68 F. Two whale sharks seen close up at Darwin's Arch—(1) 50+ feet, (2) 25+. Visibility poor—50 feet max. Great live-aboard—wonderful crew—very helpful, cleaned all gear at end of trip. Food great.

**Galapagos Aggressor, July 2005, Frank Zegler (frankzeg@aol.com), Idledale, CO.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: currents, no currents. On our first trip to the Galapagos in Dec 2003 we had a chance encounter with a juvenile whale shark. We were with Scuba Iguana and after that experience and the previous week's diving on the Aggressor we swore we would return in the peak whale-shark season this year. Before the week on the Aggressor we again dove two days with Scuba Iguana and had four great dives. The Gordon Rocks dive — dozens of scalloped hammerheads at arms distance it seemed, tons of schooling fish, Golden rays, etc. N Seymour; five large whitetips in a single cave — literally dozens of individual animals. A manta at our feet on the safety stop. On the Aggressor our good dive karma had apparently been exhausted and we spent the next week seeing damn little despite driving all the way out to Darwin, Wolf etc. No whale sharks, a handful of hammerheads, No whitetips

at N Seymour (two days later than the previous great dive). What was there? A bunch of very pissed-off divers who had just dropped 3-5 kilo dollars each to see ... nothing they couldn't have seen for a lot less money. We did see the odd dolphin, but not the hundreds we had snorkeled with 18 months before. And there were small groups of spotted eagle rays on a couple dives. Add to this a broken Zodiac that forced half the divers into an overcrowded inflatable tender. It was a less than satisfying experience. Perversely I dove Gordon Rocks with Scuba Iguana the day after we dove it with the Aggressor (on which we had horrendous currents but saw basically nothing) and was surrounded by giant schools of half-beaks and barracuda with quite a few sea lions. The crew of the Aggressor was very hard working and tried to find those critters but failed. We asked if they had a "fish finder" on their depth sounder but apparently they don't. You would think that this simple tool would be handy for finding schools of fish that were paying \$400/day to see. The other Aggressor boat saw one whale shark during this period. Once we got back to shore we asked about this "whale shark season" thing. We also asked about the other boats that were out there with us — the Lammer Law and the Skydancer. Well since they had longer and different itineraries they saw quite a few whale sharks as well as Ocean Sunfish and some sperm whale sightings. Grrrrrrr. To what do I attribute this terrible trip to? Well there is something to say about being in the water early—which is what the Scuba Iguana folks do. With the traditional (and comfy) breakfast and

first dive schedule on the Aggressor there is no way you can get in the water much before 9:00. The SI guides either have clairvoyant powers or have better local knowledge than the Aggressor crew. We might have had a weird water condition—there was practically no current out at Darwin and the weather was balmy — we were expecting a lot more wind, colder conditions and more powerful currents — we understood that these were the conditions that were optimal for the big critters. We also suspect that as for hammerheads at Darwin we may be seeing the result of the extensive shark finning out there. There certainly were NO lobsters ( well, two and I'm not saying where) and we saw exactly one sea cucumber. Those two species have been hunted to the last specimen by the “desperate” local fishermen (most of whom are hardly long-standing residents and are instead relative newcomers bent on making a better living than on the mainland no matter what the long-term consequences). We hear that since Gordon Rocks is rather close-in that there is less fishing pressure on it since you cannot hide your illegal boat so readily. There are fewer people in the water with the small day boats than with the big live-boards. Certainly the bubble curtains released by 20 divers hanging on the rocks create a repellent effect on the sharks.

**Nemo, January 2005, Mickey Rosenberg (mickeyrosenberg@cox.net), Providence, RI.** Experience: 101-250 dives. is: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 55 to 70 F., surge, currents. My wife is an avid snorkeler and hates being trapped with dive nuts, so Darwin and Wolf

were out. Pre trip, we were advised that there aren't many boats that do the standard Southern route (called Naturalist cruises) and also offer Scuba. That is not true: there appeared to be many. Nonetheless, the Nemo, an 82 foot catamaran, turned out to be a wonderful choice. In excellent condition, wonderful crew, and Alexis — our guide topside was knowledgeable — I was the only diver, he took me to some great spots — only 3-5 dives , but they were great, and I did a few more land based dives. Gordon Rocks was electrifying, “walls” of hammerheads, A large bull shark being harassed by two sea lions, many white tips and Galapagos sharks, turtles and eagle rays, and a healthy assortment of fish. Each dive was similar, mild to strong currents, extreme temp. variations- about 70 f on the surface, dropped off into the 50s at depth. I found a 5mm 1-piece best, I took a 2 mm beany and tough 3 mm gloves were critical on the one dive with max current and surge to grab a rock here and there. Took my reg/computer and RX mask and 1 mm wetsuit was great for snorkeling. Rental gear decent, was glad I didn't take full gear, as the travel (2 days each way) arduous. Only downside to a sailboat- tiny cabins, little real sailing, a fair amount of noisy motoring (ear plugs and I-pod God sent) the great crew and travel mates — 4 Swiss Docs and spouses (I'm a Doc). In Puerto Aroya, we spent 5 days after our week at sea, we stayed at the Red Mangrove Inn, a cool place right near The Chas Darwin Center: Artsy colorful, and they up graded us to the “minor” suite — ask for it even if you have to pay more — 360 views of the

sea and surrounds. For day trip diving, Scuba Iguana seemed professional, but had large classes of newbies, and full boats with check out dives; so I went with Scuba Extra across from Hotel Silberstein, with 4 experienced divers, and two divemasters. On my last day I biked around, and came upon the Hyperbaric Chamber, I talked with the Docs and got a tour. First class small facility. They treat mostly local "fisherman" who violate all the profiles, divemasters, and 3-5 tourists a year. Fishing bans were being violated, as the Mayor of the Galaps- a fisherman-threw his political support behind the President of the Country in return for lack of enforcement of the ban. Potentially devastating to the ecology. I was upset when I showed them my DAN Card and asked if it would cover a series of Chamber treatments — they said the reimbursement didn't come close to covering their expense. Go the Galapagos soon, before all the sharks are in Asian soup!

**Reina Silvia, October 2004, Kevin Elman (hammerhead7@comcast.net) Greeley, CO.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, no currents. Spectacular diving! Marc Bernardi of Aquatic encounters does everything in his power to make sure you have a good time, great pre trip communication and a heck of a nice guy. The Reina Silvia set up for diving is perfect for a live-aboard. We had the presidents suite and the extra room was nice. Crew is helpful and attentive to divers needs. Whale sharks on every dive (saw 5 on one dive alone)! Magnificent hammerheads and walls of fish! Communication on the boat (and in the water) could use improve-

ment. Sometimes the divemaster was a little more concerned about shooting his video, than what's going on with the group (ok for experienced divers maybe not beginners). Ants in our room attacked the snacks, provided by the boat. Tip envelopes in rooms seemed pushy. Things to know before: Bring more cash (ATM can be flaky), bring extra gear, don't count on everything working once you get there, there's no repair shop! UW Photography Comments: it's the Galapagos a photography Mecca! Divemaster (Victor) good at pointing and finding things.

**Reina Silvia, October 2004, Paul Gillespie (paulgillespiel@yahoo.com), Tacoma, WA.** Vis: 80-76 feet. Water: 70-75 F. A boat with the personal touch—hot towels, great food, snacks, hot chocolate and a friendly, helpful crew, from the Captain to the waiter. Boat was immaculate and comfortable. With Marc Bernardi, who pioneered the dive spots all operators now use, I received personal attention, with an eye on my experience and ability, progressively building my confidence and comfort zone in the first few dives. Expert guide Victor Mendia, a former Ecuadorian Special Forces soldier, and Marc altered the route to remain at Darwin for several days. Whale sharks on 9 out of 10 dives, schooling hammerheads, green turtles, dozens of moray eels, and thick schools of fish. I had three intimate swims with whale sharks only inches away, one lasting 10 minutes. We all used 5 mm wet suits with 3 and 5 mm hoods and still became chilled in the 74F water. I recommend 5mm gloves with solid gripping surface, but many of us used local hardware store

gloves, which worked just fine, to grip the jagged surfaces of rocks to hold one's position in currents. Expect blue water safety stops, occasional current and surge and expert dingy drivers to be only seconds away when you surface. Snorkeled with dolphins, penguins and sea lions, and had three fascinating land tours, to view boobies, marine iguanas, sea lions, and giant turtles. We all toured the Otavalo market featuring oodles of Ecuadorian crafts.

**Reina Silvia, June 2005, Carol L. Gray, Tampa, FL.** Water temp at Darwin low 70s, other diving was high 70s. Visibility was good. Spent three days diving in Darwin with whale sharks, hammerheads and Galapagos sharks. Victor, our dive master and naturalist, was focused on our getting the most out of our trip. The land tours were educational and fun. The boat is comfortable and our crew fantastic. Marc Bernardi of Aquatic Encounters and his contacts in Ecuador did an excellent job of organizing the travel logistics and activities.

**Reina Silva, June 2005, Terry Anderson, College Station, TX.** Experience: 400+ dives. Vis 25 to 75 ft. Water 72-80 F. In the 2005 Chapbook divers gave the Reina Silva high recommendations — and they were right. It is a superb live-aboard, friendly, efficient crew, great food, even brewed coffee, comfortable rooms, and a fine DM below water and above—Victor Mendina. Marc takes care of all arrangements, even flights if necessary to Quito or guided tours in northern Ecuador. Diving is from three Zodiacs, 16 divers in three different groups, and the boat drivers will find anyone who gets lost;

they know the currents. Everyone had lots of dives, and you dive your profile and computer, professional. Sea lions, turtles, penguins, sea horses, eels, a 5 meter manta and a school of five eagle rays, and then at Darwin—continual hammerheads, Galapagos, and silky sharks, and Mrs. Big. Our group saw seven whale sharks, four on the last day, all 35 footers or larger, big pregnant females. Two of us did not see any the day before, so Victor took a vote and we stayed an extra day at Darwin, instead of going to Wolf, and so all of us got to see the four Big Gals; outstanding service. My wife wore a 5/4/3 wetsuit and I wore a 3 mm. The land excursions were excellent, informative, and the captain seemed to miss the masses from the land tour boats. From Guayaquil, Ecuador, you can do a side trip to Peru and go climb to Machu Picchu. A fabulous trip.

**Reina Silvia, July 2005. Bill and Pat Archer, Brownville, NY.** Marc Bernardi was planning to come but did not because of his wife's surgery; but he created a wonderful experience for all fourteen divers. Victor and William were excellent guides. Victor was a master at getting us to sites rich with sea life, and his land tours were wonderful and knowledgeable. William kept track our group in the water and made sure we were okay. The boat crew was courteous and friendly; they were a great help with our equipment and lifting us into the pangas. The current was strong on some dives so we held on to rocks when we swam to places to watch the hammerheads swim by and wait for a whale shark. There were moray eels in every crevice on most dives. We

stayed at Darwin an extra day, which was great of the crew. We saw five whale sharks; some in our group saw seven in the two and one-half days we dove there. We swam hard to get to each, and it was worth every breath. The Galapagos Islands are stark and beautiful; we also loved visiting the Darwin Research Station and seeing the giant Galapagos turtles Adrienne Abbott worked hard to make our accommodations comfortable on the boat and on the post-trip to Machu Picchu.

**Reina Silvia, July 2005, Sue Taylor (staylor@courier.com).** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 70-75 F, currents. Our dive guides, Victor Mendia and William Astudilla, were excellent. We booked our trip through Aquatic Encounters, Marc Bernardi (aquatenctr@aol.com) 303/494-8384; super to work with before, during and after the trip. We started with a few days in Quito with organized activities. The trip to Otavalo market was worth it. Also, old town Quito is very nice. Off to the Islands. The boat is nice and the cabins are fine but space is limited. On our check out dive several sea lions played with us and although the dive was listed at 20-30 minutes, everyone stayed down much longer! From turtles, eels, rays, sharks—silkie, black tip, white tip, Galapagos and of course whale sharks, penguins (snorkel trip), octopus, and schools of fish that make you feel like you're in an aquarium! And that's just underwater—then you've got the boobies, frigates, iguanas, giant tortoises and so much more. All dives are off a dinghy (pangas). Gearing up in the dinghy isn't that hard and the captain and DM help get the BC's on.

Getting back into requires assistance for most divers! I wore a 7-6-5 suit with a 7mm core warmer the entire time. My husband wore a 7mm and left his 3mm core warmer off on a few dives. I wore a hood and Kevlar gloves to hold on due to the currents. The crew was exceptional and used three pangas, so picking up divers was fast. I recommend the Dive Alert horn and a sausage. Safety stops are free floating. The crew on the boat was great. One day I asked if they had any popcorn and sure enough they did. Nelson makes the best hot chocolate! Typical day—wake up music at 6 a.m.; fresh coffee and a continental breakfast; 6:30 dive briefing and 7am hit the water, back on board around 8:30, full breakfast — pancakes or French toast, cereal, breads, cheese, eggs, fresh fruit, bacon, sausage. 10B10:30 is dive two briefing and dive. Back on the boat around noon ready for lunch —12:30-1pm. Full hot lunch, no sandwiches! Fill out that dive log, change batteries in the camera and you're at dive briefing at 2:30pm—in the water by 3pm—back on the boat by 4:30. Now you might have either a 4th dive or a land visit before dinner. If you do four dives in a day, the schedule is pushed together. We only did one night dive, which was nice with several seahorses. Appetizers before dinner — chicken legs, pigs in a blanket, local food. Dinner — soup, then a good size piece of fish, chicken or meat with a starch and veggies. The spaghetti was wonderful; mine was veggie and everyone else had beautiful shrimp with red sauce. Meals are all served. Elvis is the bartender you want at any party! Wines were nice and reasonable. Soft drinks and water free.

**Sky Dancer, June 2004, Pat McGuire, MD, St. Louis, MO.** Water: 68 F, strong currents. This was our second trip aboard the Sky Dancer on a special itinerary with 3 days at Darwin Island specifically to see whale sharks. In 2003, we saw 9 whale sharks in 3 days at Darwin. This year we had 27 encounters in 3 days, including 3 times when we saw 2 at the same time. We also saw hundreds of hammerheads, Galapagos sharks, and dolphins. A school of melon head whales accompanied the Zodiacs back to the Sky Dancer one afternoon. Conditions were difficult, with 68 degree water and strong currents. We dove from zodiacs and hung onto rocks at "the Platform" at the base of Darwin's Arch for each dive. We would stay there and wait for whale sharks, our first dive we saw the first whale shark 2 minutes into the dive. After a few minutes if we didn't see any we would drift until we ran into one. We saw at least one whale shark on each of 12 dives at Darwin and also saw one at Wolff island. At Wolff we also saw Eagle rays, and many Galapagos sharks, turtles, and mantas. The boat was great, with nice rooms and a great crew. Minimal land excursions, we did snorkel with penguins and sea lions one afternoon.

**Sky Dancer, January 2005, Preston A. Ball (mdleather4ever@yahoo.com), Flowery Branch, GA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 48 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 78 F., choppy, currents. A tremendous operation/destination. Not for beginners; cold water, strong currents, thick wetsuits/heavy weighting/buoyancy concerns, and dinghy diving make the diving challenging but worth the payoff. Large schools of dense fish,

playful sea lions, interesting volcanic topography, manta rays, stingrays, turtles, and of course sharks — Galapagos, hammerheads, silkies — all plentiful. Sensory overload. Peter Hughes operation is topnotch; excellent service and accommodations. Land excursions with animal interactions interesting and guided. Pricy but worth every cent. UW Photography Comments: Good camera table, isolated and dry. Plenty of room. Could have used a few more electrical outlets, but those provided were sufficient. Place for video to play and lots of camera work space. Cameras were rinsed after each dive.

**Sky Dancer, August 2005, Bob Hill (beobe@cfl.rr.com), Apopka, FL.** Special Peter Hughes trip in association with Amos Nachoum ([www.biganimals.com](http://www.biganimals.com)). Two-week itinerary structured and marketed as seeking out the big animals and sold out in three days. 9-days diving Wolf and Darwin Islands and there were many whale shark encounters. My wife and my first encounter (after years of trying) with those magnificent school-bus sized creatures. Almost daily interaction with Galapagos, silky, scalloped hammerhead and white tip sharks, sometimes in schools of 100. Ongoing squadrons of eagle rays flying in precise formation like the Air Force Blue Angels. At times an eagle ray would remain stationary for the diver to explore fully and photograph this creature. The following were spotted on just one dive at Punta Vicente Roca, at the northwest part of Isabela Island: the mola-mola or sunfish (the largest bony fish of the oceans); whale shark; horned shark, the usual contingent of sharks; dozens of playful sea lions; seahorses;

many large turtles; jellyfish; octopus; penguins; red-lipped batfish; flightless cormorants; marine iguanas; marbled rays and untold numbers of other fish. There is a spectacular vertical wall loaded with colorful corals, sponges and untold numbers of small critters in the many nooks and crannies to include a small brilliant blue nudibranch. The visibility not great and the water is a bone-chilling 60 degrees at depth. The water temperature at Wolf and Darwin was upward of 77 degrees. Amos Nachoum, a professional photographer, is eager to share his photographic expertise with the passengers. Evening slide shows of some of his other big animal photo/adventure trips around the world were a delight.

**Sky Dancer, September 2005, Matt Brandt (skicheese@aol.com), Los Angeles, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 60 Feet. Water: 61 to 73 F, choppy, surge, currents. Arguably the best and most grueling dive trip I have been on. The first day on the Sky Dancer we scrambled to get our equipment set up and find our room. My wife and I had a front cabin, on the lower deck with two single beds, not ideal for a honeymoon or if you have a tender spot for sea sickness. We most definitely needed the Patch, Relief band, and a homeopathic cornucopia of seasickness medicines. This did not overshadow the sheer wonder and excitement created by an attentive staff and crew both for all your needs above board to all your diving needs. Very helpful staff on the Sky Dancer. Jaimie, our divemaster, gets excellent remarks for keeping our group together, pointing out nudibranchs to whale sharks. Our trip

started on the southern Islands with a check out dive accompanied by an eagle ray and playful sea lions. We then did a rough 11-hour crossing to the central islands where the weather was cloudy and the seas rough and cold. Our first dive concluded by being encircled by approximately 30 Golden Cow nosed rays! The following days produced prolific marine encounters with many close ups with friendly feeding turtles, schooling barracudas on at least five dives, close ups with marble rays, sea lions and schools of fish so thick that the sun was blotted out. The price for these encounters was strong current and heaving surge, not a comfortable beginners trip. On Shore excursions we mingled with sea lions inches from our faces, marine and land iguanas, blue and red footed boobies, albatrosses, every finch imaginable, frigate birds as guides between crossings, hawks you can almost touch, flamingos, giant tortoises and snorkeling with feeding penguins. At Wolf and Darwin Island the surrounding seas had hundreds of melon head whales and bottle nose dolphins, both of which we had many encounters with underwater. Our panga driver and dive guide let us snorkel with huge schools. The silent goal of the trip was to spot the "Big Senior," the Whale Shark. On our path to find this mythic fish, we were treated to fast currents and endless schools of hammerheads, punctuated with curious beefy Galapagos sharks patrolling near the reefs edge. Our safety stops found us screaming in our regulators as a school of eagle rays and mobula rays flew past. The whale shark dives find you amidst ten's of thousands of schooling Pacific

Creole fish fighting current in hopes of hearing the dive masters tank banger go off. This is the alarm that lets you know that the Big Senior is in the House. That's also the signal to kick as fast as you can to get a glimpse of this beautiful barge of a fish. Heart pounding and exhilarating, these encounters, although not guaranteed, will imprint themselves on you as permanent memories. While on these dives, don't forget to look at all the other marine life that will approach from Tuna to schooling jacks and African Pompano. The one night dive I did offered up a red lipped bat fish and giant sleeping sea turtle. The food on the boat was excellent with a mix of local tastes and standard fare. I am a videographer and the 2-tired photo table on the dive deck was more than adequate for working with your gear before and after the dive. They had a high pressure air hose and rinse tank. The crew would rinse you gear once on the boat. Equipment was handled well in the Panga. Charge table had room for everyone's batteries. I chose to back roll into the water as my entry with my video housing in one hand as the boat usually let us off in rough waters and I wanted to get below the surface when I hit the water. I suggest this method for all who are willing to try it. There was minimal impact to the camera as you can almost keep it held out of the water upon impact.

**Sky Dancer, September 2005, Peggy Weems (weems@att.net), Monroe, OR.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 65 to 72 F., choppy, surge, currents. Wonderful trip. I used a dry suit, which was comfortable. I was glad I had read the previous reports

that suggested the need for good gloves. In these strong currents that can toss you up or down, you will want to grab the rocks. Beginning or timid divers should not go. I have over 500 dives and still had a moment or two when I felt like a beginner trying to dump air fast enough to avoid popping to the surface. It is hard to describe the awesome feeling you get when a school-bus sized whale shark cruises next to you. There were schools of hammerheads and eagle rays. The manta rays are impressive. Great shore excursions, fabulous diving. Almost everyone was using digital. There is a large camera table and a "cameras only" rinse tank. There is also a nearby battery charging station.

## MEXICO

### Guadalupe Island

**Great White Adventures, August 2004, Kent Bonde (kentbonde@miamibeachfl.gov), Miami Shores, FL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 68 to 70 F, calm, choppy, surge. For the second year, San Francisco-based Great White Adventures (GWA) chartered the Solmar V from mid-August until December to run its "luxury" live-aboard trips to Guadalupe Island to dive with great white sharks. The \$2,775 price includes one night in San Diego at the Hampton Inn Downtown, a two-hour bus ride to Ensenada and five days and four nights on the Solmar V. The crossing to Guadalupe from Ensenada takes about 20 hours and can be a rough — we had steady six footers the whole way over. Definitely recom-