

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.

Less than professional operation. Next diving with Deep Blue at hotel Costa Real Cabo (formerly Plaza Las Glorias). Diving with Luis, excellent divemaster and operation. Only problem is a 3-step ladder getting back on the boat. They need something more substantial. Nice for one or two days but not for a week of diving. Best season in Sept to Dec but also hurricane season.

Deep Blue, Pueblo Bonito, Cabo San Lucas, December 2004, Mike Greeley (izod327@yahoo.com), San Leandro, CA. Experience: 100+ dives. Vis: 20 to 40 ft. Water: 70 to 74 F, calm & flat. Great dive shop. The owner, Oscar, is fluent in English, Spanish and Japanese. Very easy to deal with. I completed my Advanced Open Water while there (\$250). www.cabodeepblue.com A City Club you can join for \$1/day. Costco is a taxi ride outside of town. The Corner Café (near the Giggling Marlin) has the best Internet and US phone access (35 cents a minute with direct line to US).

Underwater Diversions, Villa Del Palmar, November 2004, Scott (txogie@hotmail.com), Arlington, Texas. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 75 F, calm, surge. One of the best dive trips we have ever made. Underwater Diversions delivered a level of support that we had never encountered. They carried your equipment to and from the boat, they cleaned our gear after the dive and stored it for us. They arranged dives based on the conditions and the experience of the divers. They realized that divers profiles differ and made arrangements for those who could stay down longer could while keeping everyone's

safety in mind. Their knowledge of the area and where and when quality marine life could be found was second to none. We had made preliminary arrangements with the dive operator prior to our trip. They refused our money until we had completed the week so that they could give us the best possible packaged based on our actual dives, not what we thought we would do. We took a day trip to La Paz and were able to snorkel approx. 2 hours with 7 whale sharks followed by 2 dives with hammerheads — incredible day of diving. My wife had problems with her regulator and they provided her with a replacement, transferred her computer to the new setup and refused to charge us rental for the gear.

Underwater Diversiones, Del Cabo, June 2005, Adam Keen (adamkeen@cox.net), Iowa City, IA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 65 to 72 F, choppy. I had a great time and the trip was excellent. The diving was similar to California but with some coral and tropical fish.

Vista Sea Sport, Buena Vista, Leonardo's, September 2004, Beth Landis (bethelandi@aol.com), Eagle, ID. Experience: 80 dives. Vis: 25-75 ft. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm and flat. This is primarily a fishing resort. We were the only divers, but at 4 PM every day, the fishermen shared their fresh catch of the day. Fabulous sushi and fish on the grill for dinner. Boat rides 45-60 minutes to dive sites. Vista Sea Sports in Buena Vista took our dive gear every night and washed and dried it. One of the highlights was a huge school of jacks. Lots of schools of fish in general.

La Paz and North

Bahia de Los Angeles, October 2004, Mel Butler (nora.mel@verizon.net), Claremont, CA. Experience: 900 dives. Vis: 4 to 20 ft. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm & flat, choppy. This F/UP on whale shark snorkeling in Bahia de Los Angeles (Undercurrent August 2002). Whale sharks did not arrive until late September, just before we arrived. We dug into sand at low tide for clams, then covered South Bay for whale sharks. Found one first day. One scuba dive across bay on rocky wall, few tropical fish, sting rays were seen. One more whale shark. Next day, looked at Petroglyphs, then went with Dr. Abraham Vasquez who found five whale sharks in choppy waters—he is the pro! Very windy next day, so went home. Excellent air station for tank fills. Gasoline in drums but Petrex Station being built. Road perfect all the way with new asphalt. Stayed at Larry and Raoul's. Great fun adventure!

Club Cantamar, May 2005, Sheryl O'Connor (johnconnor2@cox.net), South Windsor, CT. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 63 to 72 F., choppy. Club Cantamar is a family-run hotel and dive operation. Although the accommodations were a little rustic (the mattresses are extremely hard and you need to bring your own hair dryer), the rooms were clean and well-kept and only a few steps from the dock. Breakfast at the restaurant and lunch on the dive boat were included in our price and were excellent. You can also get a pkg. with dinner included, but we went into La Paz every night since we had a rental car. It is a 10-minute ride and there are excel-

lent restaurants and shops, as well as a wonderful seaside walkway from which to view the sunsets. Carlos n' Charlie's make salsa fresh at your table. The first day we went to the bay of La Paz and snorkeled with whale sharks. Since the larger whale sharks don't come in until early Fall, these were younger, smaller whale sharks and they tended to swim quickly away, so unless you're an Olympic class swimmer, you may not get close to one. Our second dive was at Los Islotes, the main home of sea lions. Not for the feint of heart. The sea lions will play with you, including nipping at your fins, legs, arms, camera, etc.—not hard, but enough to startle at first. Our third dive was a Mexican navy wreck at 50-feet; it hadn't been there long, but there were some fish and small critters. The second day we headed out to El Bajo, about 6 miles from Isla Partida, a seamount 70-feet down in open sea and is supposed to be the premier site for large pelagics. Unfortunately, we were turned back by heavy winds and choppy seas and spent the day at closer sites off the islands. This may happen often. The dive crew was friendly, attentive and helpful, providing excellent briefings and guided dives. Bring your 5 or 7-mm wetsuit and a hood since the waters are pretty chilly and don't really get much warmer until later in the year. The really cool stuff can be seen mostly in the Fall — hammerheads, large whale sharks, and whales. The sea lions give birth in late May and early June, so this is not the time to visit them; the females stay on shore with the pups, while the bulls are in the water and, judging from the size of these bulls, you do not want to be in the water with

them while they are guarding their young. We drove up the west coast from Cabo San Lucas and took the east coast road back to the airport in San Jose; the countryside is spectacular, especially the east coast road through the mountains. The first day we saw a huge wahoo that someone had just brought in — the chef was going to turn it into some nice souvenir steaks to take home, and the rest was going to be served at dinner in the restaurant. UW Photography Comments: There were no special facilities for cameras on the dive boats, only one fresh water bucket that was not restricted to cameras.

Club Cantamar, August 2005, Dr. Bill Schlegel, Jefferson City. Visibility varied from 25-30 feet in the Bay of La Paz to 100 out in the open Sea of Cortez. Water averaged 83 F near surface, down to 75-78 F under thermoclines that were below 70 to 100 feet. Very calm surface with occasional currents of one knot. Air 100F. This is my 8th trip to Cantamar and they continue to improve. There are now three hotel "towers," a nice dining facility, pool with swim-up bar along with large area of gear lockers and marina. They offer hydrocarbon-free air along with Nitrox and support re-breather divers with higher concentrations of oxygen and has Sodasorb available. The quality of the divemasters is high, they are all personable and the boats are mostly improved. Now, most boats do 25 knots and even the biggest, the Uno Mas, is capable of 25 knots. This one will hold about 15 divers comfortably. The captains are experienced and at least two of them are passable cooks. Pedro, the owners younger son, Aki (who speaks

Japanese) and Heidi (German-Dutch and English with a New York accent) are a few of the excellent dive masters, even with the faster boats that you will be spending 6-8 hours on each boat without returning to shore. This is big country and a lot of territory is covered to get to the best dive sites. All boats have heads (some have male and female separate), oxygen, GPS, marine radio, acceptable protection from the sun. The operation is beginning to remind me of the Scuba Club in Cozumel in size and quality. I like the two passenger ultra-light amphibious aircraft (the Red Pelican) that Fernando Aquilar, the owner of Cantamar, purchased for spotting whale sharks, and is committed to the Shark Research Institute. This, along with the cooperation of the whale sharks themselves has lead to almost 100% connection of divers with whale sharks over the last year according to Fernando. Overt harassment of the animals is not allowed. The number of divers allowed in proximity to the animals is limited. The result is a lot a whale shark exposure and the animals are usually available (and getting huge). We had four the day I went out. They are now venturing farther out from Cantamar routinely. Trips all the way up to Las Animas reef and San Franciscocita seamount are common and allow divers to get to remote areas usually only reached by the live aboards. There seem to be more hammerheads at El Bajo. There were always there but most divers had trouble encountering them because of their depth and shyness. They seem to be easier to spot now. We also saw mantas, large tuna (probably skip-jack) and hundreds of

green morays on El Bajo. Other sites: Salvatiere wreck. Swanee reef, whale rock, Fang Ming wreck, Los Isolotes sea lion colony, El Bajito, La Reigna and La Reignita. Common fish are sea bass, dog snappers, schools of sardines and schools of chevron barracuda, octopi, tiger moray and others. The sea lion colony is great for photo opportunities or video of inquisitive sea lions. Every week at Cantamar includes a couple of dives at the Sea Lion colony. The juveniles are friendly and quickly learned to approach me in such a way that I could scratch their backs. They seemed to love this. But they will nip you (without breaking the skin) if you go “over the line,” or sometimes if you stop scratching! The adult females seem to stand off at a distance and watch the pups and juveniles; to be sure everything is safe. The bulls occasionally charge into the whole melee and disrupt things for a minute or two. Somehow, this has been going on for years without any serious injury to divers or Sea Lions according to Francisco. Cantamar is about 12 miles NE of La Paz at the end of a peninsula jutting into the Sea of Cortez. It is next to Espiritu Santu Island that great for sea kayaking and snorkelers. You can go to downtown La Paz via van almost any time you’d like; if you have a small group who would like to go, the front desk seems to be able to arrange a driver. Most packages include breakfast and dinner at the restaurant, with a sandwich or tacos on the boat for lunch. Serving is generally buffet style at the restaurant with a well-presented selection. You can place special orders for dinner but will probably pay a little extra. The

“new” dining area has a beautiful ocean view with sunsets and sunrises. Free bottled water both on the boats and from multiple water coolers. Fernando the owner has become a patron of the arts. He now has a resident artist who is doing paintings and murals. There are many floral scenes and decorations over most of the hotel room doors. There a couple of large paintings in and about the dining room that are reproductions of French impressionist and Dutch renaissance painters. One is a 10-foot wide reproduction of Peter Bruegels “Peasant Wedding” that adorns the dining room. This is a truly amazing and faith-full reproduction of one of the greatest Dutch Master’s paintings except the man in the far corner who is recognizable as Fernando, the resort’s owner; the theme is a bunch of peasants chowing down at a wedding; perhaps analogous to a bunch of hungry divers. The French Impressionist painting behind the bar is Toulouse-Lautrec’s “The Dance at the Moulin Rouge.” A colorful and happy scene, I guess appropriate for a bar. Cantamar has just purchased a 90-foot ship to use as a live-aboard dive boat. The Fiesta probably started life as a fishing boat as it has a huge refrigeration system and coolers in the hold. These waste a lot of space. The most recent incarnation was as a sunset cruise vessel out of Mazatlan. The owners tell me they plan a major refurbishing to get it “up to standards for live aboard diving.” It will need a lot of work. I certainly wouldn’t book a week on this thing, the way it is configured (and smells) when there are vessels like the Solmar V and San Jose available in the region.

San Carlos, Eastern Sea of Cortez

Gary's Dive Shop, October 2004, Jorge Becerra (jbecerraillingworth@hotmail.com), Minneapolis, MN. Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 35 to 45 Feet. Water: 75 to 85 F, calm, no currents. They have a quite a few boats. Gary (the owner) came out to greet all boats, introduce the crews, give a general safety talk and see us off. When you see that level of commitment from an owner it is a good sign! I did 2 day 2 tank dives; since I was by myself I buddied with people in the boat. The diving was great; our dive master did a great job explaining the details of the currents where we were diving (sea Lion Island) and how to "read" the body language of sea lions so we could all have a safe and fun dive. Gary's crew was extremely professional and helpful; they even carried O rings in the boat _just in case. To top it all of they made the best fish tacos for lunch. It would have been easier if they would have facilitated budding up divers as my first day buddies were low skilled divers. Safe, Professional and Great service.

Ocean Sports, October 2004, Debbie Crosby (crosby75@hotmail.com), Colorado Springs, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. This was a trip set up by our local dive shop and information about the specifics were lacking. I wished I had known that the Hotel Fiesta that we were staying in was under construction. The restaurant was closed except for breakfast. Jesus, our waiter, was a bright spot greeting

us on the terrace with coffee and juice and a full American breakfast while we watched the dolphins playing in the ocean. After finding that the restaurant had no hot tea, I asked for a cup of hot water on the 2nd day and brought my own tea bag, after that Jesus made sure I had my hot water every morning.

The construction crew made messes of our balconies during the day while our clothing, gear, etc was drying. The dive company (Ocean Sports) could only think about making money. The first day, we had pre-ordered Nitrox and had to send the crew back to the shop to bring it to the boat. Therefore, the boat was late pulling out of the harbor. After completing our first dive, we were informed that we could shorten our surface interval or shorten our 2nd dive, but the boat was returning to shore in one hour due to the fact that we were late leaving. Some of our group had only 35 minute surface interval and chose to go ahead and do a 2nd dive that soon since they had paid \$85 each for a 2-tank dive. On our 2nd day using this company, again no pre-ordered Nitrox on the boat and the crew had to seek it out. After putting 23 divers and 4 crew on the boat, they proceeded to load 19 tourists. There was no safety briefing and the boat was overloaded. I talked with the crew about my concerns and they put me on the phone with the shop manager. He informed me that they could handle 38 people on that boat, I told him there were now 46 and he stated "it was business." At the end of the day, the manager met our boat and offered a free night boat dive due to all of our group's problems and concerns. Playful sea lions at San Pedro Island

posed and played with anyone that would play with them or had a camera. Also saw lots of torpedo rays. We found a super alternative to this shop, Surface Time, which met all of our needs including safety and comfort. For the same price, they took no more than 6 divers on their larger boat. We booked a smaller boat and they took just the 2 of us (husband and me) to do some local dive spots. On our way out to the dive sites, we were able to troll and catch fish. Our boat captain made lunch with our fresh catch while we were doing our first dive. After completing our 1 hour surface interval, we trolled to a new site and completed our 2nd dive of the day as happy divers. The boats only had a salt-water rinse bucket — no table for setup since they used the only table for food.

UNITED STATES

California

Catalina Scuba Luv, August 2004, Fiona Rattray, Elora, Ont. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 59 F., calm, choppy, no currents. I dived with Catalina Scuba Luv on the King Neptune. I arrived with my own drysuit and equipment but no dive buddy. The good people at Scuba Luv set me up with a father-son team who had dived Catalina plenty of times and acted as good tour guides. The rest of the diving group were EMTs getting their Open Water Certification for work. Between the well-maintained boat, clear dive briefings, helpful crew, the herd of EMTs and my dive buddies I've never felt safer on a dive boat! We did a three-

tank day, diving Red Rock Quarry, Bird Rock and Toqua Springs. Since my previous dive trip was to Vancouver Island, with water a good 10 degrees colder, Catalina seemed toasty! The kelp forest and all her denizens were enchanting. At the end of the day, I surfaced to a full moon over the water just behind the dive boat. The next few days I shore dived Casino Point with Catalina Divers Supply. This was an easy and relaxing series of dives; you just walk down the steps and you're in. If the tide is out when you come back, be prepared for an ungainly slither over the rocks at the foot of the steps. Lots of Garibaldi, sheepshead and other lovelies among the kelp towers. I met up with the same dive buddies for these dives; it would not have been difficult to find others to dive with as a single diver.

EASTERN PACIFIC LIVE-ABOARDS

CANADA

British Columbia

Nautilus Explorer, August 2005, Douglas Banik, Redding, CT. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 45 to 50 F, calm, currents. The Nautilus Explorer is a brilliantly designed dive boat. It consists of two boats really: a 116' motor yacht with cabins for up to 24 divers; large salon with HDTV for viewing digital photos, videos; large, uncrowded dining room that seats 24 comfortably. Not ultra luxury, but "ship shape and Bristol." The second boat is