

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 Pangas. 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-

ment the Dramamine. Since the vessel anchors on the leeward side of Guadalupe Island, wind and seas are not an issue there. They conduct diving in two four-person cages attached to Solmar's dive platform by two specially designed brackets to reduce cage movement and to facilitate entering and exiting the cages. Air is surface-supplied. A two-person deep cage is deployed on the second day (depending on current and surface conditions). After a thorough dive briefing by GWA's founder Lawrence Groth, divers are split into four four-person teams and assigned to rotating one-hour shifts per cage. After the first couple of rotations, cage time becomes more flexible as many sit out rotations and observe the action from the upper deck. Within 18 minutes of deploying the hang baits, the first shark showed up. After that we had 15 sharks, ranging in size from 8-12 feet and one about 16 feet. The Solmar crew was exceptional, the food and drink was plentiful and the quality of accommodations was first class. Solmar V provides a generously sized camera table on the aft deck, complete with a stowage shelf for camera cases and air nozzles to dry off gear. Dive crew is quick to retrieve and rinse cameras in two large freshwater rinse bins. Media center provides means to review video and digital photography on large flat screen TV and smaller monitors located around the main salon and dining areas.

**Great White Adventures, September 2004, Tim Nugent, Huntington Beach, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 70 to 70 F, calm, no currents. Guadalupe Island, 100+ miles off the Pacific coast of Mexico,

200+ miles south of San Diego holds several world records for spear fishing — primarily large tuna. However, it has also been the site of several shark attacks on spear fishermen. Our boat was organized by Mauricio Handler, an UWP out of the Caribbean, and several of his colleagues. Photography knowledge was high, and learning was contagious. The tour operator was Lawrence Groth, owner of Great White Adventures. The boat was the Searcher; a long range fishing boat out of San Diego. This was a spectacular trip. Nothing but white sharks. Up close and in your face — touching distance from the cage, but really not advised. Sharks ranged from 8' to 14'. Not one dive was made without multiple sightings. The boat is 95' long, and while we were in cages off the transom, we could clearly see the anchor line off the bow. Excellent visibility, although with their counter shading, the sharks could get to within 50' ~75' of us before we spotted them. Divers rotated through the cages; one hour in, one hour out. By noon of the 2nd day, people began to spend more time in the salon, so cage space freed up and we ended up getting a lot of time in the water. One thing Lawrence has done differently than others is to develop a 3rd cage, a deep cage. This cage is 4'x4'x 8' deep. It is lowered 20' under the boat, and you are free to stand on top of the cage and film the sharks as they pass closely overhead, to your side and beneath you. Only one diver and the safety diver at a time in the deep cage, oriented back-to-back, both keeping a sharp lookout for curious sharks. There were plenty. Lawrence has been doing this for a few years, and he is well

prepared. Plenty of tuna in the hold for bait, plenty of food and beer for us. He even has an underwater speaker blasting tunes out underwater to pass the time. The sharks appear more interested in classic rock and come in closer. Highlight was being in the deep cage with my safety diver, Scott Davis (one of the great white researchers that occasionally shows up on Discovery Channel during Shark Week) and having eight large white sharks swimming around us as we stood on top of the cage filming. There were probably 50 cameras on board, and the crew was good at identifying and passing down your next rig, while rinsing and putting away your spent camera.

## Revillagigedo Islands

**Nautilus Explorer, February 2005, Jerry Tuttle (Milo3@cox.net), Phoenix, AZ.** Experience:

Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, calm, no currents. Sharks (hammerheads, Galapagos, silky and reef white tips), whales and giant mantas—they appeared on nearly every dive. Most were friendly and curious, as if they wanted to interact with us. We did, of course, and they rewarded us with the experience of a lifetime. Boat and crew are among the best. Food was generally very good. Boat has nice wine selection and a large selection of microbrews. Only negative is the 24-hour steam from La Paz and return to Cabo San Lucas. We had great weather both ways, but with rough seas the passage would not be pleasant. They scheduled our trip to leave from Cabo San Lucas, but because of a turf war between the

Nautilus Explorer and the owner of the Solmar we were forced to leave from La Paz. The crew handled this change well and made this merely an inconvenience. Good area to set up gear and good facilities for reviewing video and digital photos.

**Nautilus Explorer, March 2005, John Sommerer (john.sommerer@jhuapl.edu), Silver Spring, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40-150 feet. Water: 73-74 F. Dive own profile. No “ad hoc” deco. Min surface intervals. “Pool closed” times. Planned deco, rebreathers OK with redundant equipment. Good camera tables, rinse, charging, facilities. Still support wet chemistry, but great facilities for digital still and video shooters. Nautilus explorer nice, built-for-diving boat. A few bugs, like aggressive nonskid that lacerated multiple ankles on the stairs. Many repeat customers aboard. The boat and owner have a good reputation from their normal operations in the Pacific Northwest. This was their first season in the Revillagigedos, and there were a few teething pains. Would prefer they went with zodiacs for skiff diving — the custom-built large aluminum skiff, apparently fine in the Inside Passage, is not great in the swell and surge of open ocean diving. Also, the owners of the Solmar V are clearly unhappy about the Nautilus’ presence, and there are related problems with land-side operations that caused a last-minute change in the departure port from Cabo to La Paz. Food was pretty good, and they have a world-class bar aboard, with good wine, micro brews, and single-malt scotch. Outstanding crew: helpful, professional, friendly, skilled,

and extremely knowledgeable. Included a whale expert, a marine biologist, and an experienced Western Mexico divemaster. Strong emphasis on safety and personal responsibility, with fairly rigidly enforced diving rules. Maybe Captain Mike Lever is wound a bit too tight, but I've never heard of an owner-operator offering to refund the charter price and travel expenses of anyone not willing to sign the release. Any minor problems were quickly and graciously addressed. Some really boring dives, supplemented by several dive-career peak experiences. Roca Partida was best on this trip, with persistent and interactive large mantas in groups of up to 6, plus sharks and schools of big fish. San Benedicto was next best. The Boiler produced some good mantas and sharks, and is a attractive dive site. The Canyon produced underwater encounters with dolphins and a humpback whale (once), as well as some large Galapagos and HH sharks. Socorro sites were disappointing, with little in the way of large animals. The crew said this was atypical. We came for the mantas, and were satisfied by the best encounters we've ever had. Those more into sharks were disappointed. The nudibranch expert was proudly showing off plain white slugs only a few mm long! Exposed octopusses were quite common. Challenging conditions led many divers to skip dives, but there were nice alternatives, like four ocean kayaks, and daily whale-watching excursions. A fair number of humpbacks were in the area, and we saw some great breaches. Mexican regulations for the area are quite restrictive. No gloves, knives, or dive lights allowed, and no shore visits are permitted.

**Nautilus Explorer, April 2005, Flavio De Simone (flaviodesimone@optonline.net), Stamford, CT.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, no currents. Boarding moved from Cabo San Lucas to La Paz due to some trouble with Mexican authorities, adding three hours driving north and six hours sailing to the trip. Live-aboard was excellent with competent captain (and owner), great cabins, food and facilities. At San Benedicto, shark life was limited, probably due to illegal fishing boats anchored at the island, but spotted few mantas and hammerheads. Socorro twilight diving was great with encounter of pod of dolphins. Roca Partida was the highlight of the trip with dives with several giant mantas (five at the same time in one dive), silvertip sharks, silkies, Galapagos sharks. Excellent trip.

**Solmar V, February 2005, Edw. C. Heimiller (heimiller@att.net), Streamwood, IL.** Experience: 2000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 75 ft. Water: 68 to 72 F, strong currents. This was my sixth trip aboard the Solmar V since 2001 (2 to the Sea of Cortez, and this was my 4th to Revillagigedo Islands). I keep returning because I like the diving, the boat, the food and the crew. I find the boat to be comfortable and yes, the "standard" cabins are small as compared to other live-aboards. Like all dive boats there is limited storage in the cabins. Rooms 201 and 203, the smallest on the boat, have been converted to singles with a storage shelf above the lower bunk where the upper bunk was. For \$100 US more/person you can get a superior room which has larger bunk beds and more floor space. In all room the

bathroom (toilet area) also serves as the shower. The main cabin is composed of four booths seating four or five and four pedestal tables seating two. After eating the area is used for lounging, reviewing dive pictures, doing log books or watching movies. Outside there is a seating area in the bow for sunning and a sun deck above the dive stations and camera table. The camera table is large and covered with nonskid material. Below it is another storage table for camera items or other items. There are four main outlets for charging on the table but the crew will expand it if you just ask. There are also outlets in the main cabin as well as each cabin. The crew is knowledgeable, friendly and helpful. They will hand you your camera once you are in the water. If diving from the zodiacs they help you into your gear once at the dive site or they will carry your gear to the main dive platform if asked. The food is great and I usually diet before the trip so I will not gain weight. There is a cold and hot breakfast with eggs cooked as you like. Lunch is soup, the main hot course, dessert. Dinner starts with a salad, the main hot course and dessert. The meals can be adjusted to your personal taste and hunger. The Revillagigedo (Socorro—English version) Islands are part of Mexico's national park system and a permit must be had by the boat and each diver. As such, the boat must check in with the naval base on each trip and divers are not allowed to wear gloves or use dive lights. The pelagics seen will vary with the weather and month of the year and also the amount of current. We did 19 dives once we arrived on site as it takes approximately 24 hours to

get there and another 24 to get back to Cabo San Lucas. Our trip started out with two humpback whales breaching, tail slapping, etc., as we exited the harbor at Cabo. We stayed there for about 30 minutes watching them in the setting sun until it got too crowded with other boats. We dove the following sites at San Benedicto Island (El Fondador—1, El Canon—6, El Boiler—5, Las Cuevas—10, Socorro (O'Neal's Rock—2, Aquarium—1) and Roca Perdida three times. El Fondador was done once we arrived at the islands in the late afternoon. It is mainly a checkout dive for the divers to get weighted properly and check the gear out, and lets the dive master see you in the water. On all dives there are two or three dive masters in the water and you can follow them or go off with your buddy. On all dives there is at least one if not two Zodiacs in the water to assist divers if needed. The dive rules are that you should dive with the group or your buddy, all dives are to be "No Decompression" dives (130 feet or less) and dives from the Zodiacs are limited to 50 minutes so the other divers who were picked up earlier do not have to wait too long in the Zodiacs. When diving from the Zodiacs the crew loads your tanks, BC and regulators for you. You then hand them your weight belt if using one, fins and camera. When you slide into the Zodiac you carry your mask with you and when exiting you take only your mask and then they hand up your camera. At El Canon the current was strong and brought many hammerhead sharks to the area, and when all divers stayed on the ridge they came in close—I could see the scallops on the front edge of

their hammer-like head. There were a couple of manta rays also. El Boiler had medium currents and produced multiple manta ray encounters. Many types of eels, reef fish, game fish, lobster, octopus and more. Las Cuevas has a rocky bottom with caves and swim through there produced white tip sharks, an old leatherback turtle, electric ray and two small tiger snake eels. O'Neal's Rock is noted for the two caves and large arch. While diving there, had strong currents and saw lobsters aplenty, sharks (white tips and hammerheads), rays and octopus. Roca Partida had medium currents at times producing many white tip sharks ranging from juveniles to adults. On the last dive the current was strong and I followed Nelson (one of the dive masters) around the point and encountered a large white tip (6 to 8 feet long) up close and upon turning around nearly bumped into a large silky shark. No whale sharks.

## Sea of Cortez

**Don Jose (Baja Expeditions), June 2005, Noel Hall (noelhall@aol.com), Louisville, KY.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. The "poor man's Galapagos." The "Don Jose" live-aboard is booked through Baja Expeditions ([www.bajaex.com](http://www.bajaex.com)). This was promoted as a "Whale Shark Expedition," in which a search plane would locate whale sharks, and in other periods we would be diving sites along side the east coast of Baja, near La Paz. We were able to swim with a whale shark on two different days, for extended periods of time. We also had great dives interacting with young sea lions. We saw plenty of fish life and

everything looked healthy. We ran into a school of dolphins, perhaps greater than 500. We did not swim with them. We also saw several large whales, but were unable to approach them. Excellent trip. It was clear in the beginning that there was no guarantee we would see whale sharks, or anything else. Also the weather might not be co-operative, but it was on our trip. The captain, crew and dive master made every attempt to make the trip enjoyable. The divemaster, Josie, a Canadian who spoke four languages, was professional and qualified. Be prepared for changing conditions; water temperatures ranging from 65 to 75 degrees, therefore 5-7mm protection is often necessary. Vis can also change quickly, from 20/25 feet to 60/70 feet. Told the vis is greater during the summer. Poor vis is due to plankton in the water....which brings in large pelagics. There can also be currents and up-welling. The boat is in the marina at La Paz, a city with their own airport, or it is about a 2 2 hour drive from the airport at San Jose del Cabo (Cabo San Lucas). Cabo has more flights, and the round trip shuttle is about line \$80. The drive is easy and scenic. The Don Jose has been around for 30 years, but is solid and comfortable. Not plush, but adequate, clean and functional. The toilets flushed and nothing smelled bad, but the cabins and other areas are "basic." The meals are not fancy, but well prepared and filling. One of those trips that require a good attitude and flexibility, and allow the crew to make it worth your time. In Cabo stayed at the Finisterra Hotel, a sister property to the Los Arcos Hotel in La Paz. Opt for

the "Palapa Club" rooms for just a few extra dollars, and enjoy. Oh my gosh... to be young again!

**Solmar V, August 2005, Steve Maguire (smaguire8587@yahoo.com), Columbus, OH.** Experience: 251-500 dives.

Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 85 to 75 F, calm. We encountered sea lions at three locations, the biggest colony was at Los Islotes. The young sea lions were eager to cavort with divers. They would chew playfully on fingers, fins, and cameras if given the chance, and encouraging them with your own acrobatics made them even more entertaining. One day we skipped two afternoon dives to look for reported whale sharks in La Paz Bay and spent several hours snorkeling with them from the boat's pangas. There were no hammerheads at El Bajo, but the site is good without them. There were hundreds of green morays with up to five in crevices. Most sites featured clouds of schooling fish that range from small to medium sized, getting progressively larger as you get away from the structure. It was a profusion of life. Most things were in larger numbers and sizes than their Caribbean counterparts, with quite a few. The boat was comfortable, though the air conditioning was pushed to its limits. My cabin was usually warmer than I would like it until the middle of the night when the cabin ac finally caught up. The crew and the food were up to luxury live-aboard standards. The dive deck was well laid out, except the last four spots on each side. I was assigned one of these stations, where the main cabin started and we were on the outside walkway, and on the other side of us was the wetsuit

storage. Each time I leaned down to reach my gear, I would have to stop to let somebody through to their wetsuit. But the divemasters were good, and the diving was great. We hit some distinct thermoclines on many dives, usually below 60 feet, but surface temps were in the mid-80s. With storage in the cabins scarce, pack lighter than usual for a live-aboard. The camera table was crowded, and there were only four working outlets, but only two were never used. Most overcrowding came from strobe arms not being folded down. Two big camera rinse tanks, although at least once one dunked their wetsuit in the camera bucket as my housing was soaking. Most people had photo gear there was no damage reported on the crowded surface of the table.

## UNITED STATES

### Alaska

**Nautilus Explorer, July 2005, Rich Orman (richorman@comcast.net),**

**Aurora, CO.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 Feet. Water: 45 to 52 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. We did a 7-day Juneau Alaska-Prince Rupert, British Columbia trip. All the diving took place in Alaska, a wonderful experience. The boat is perfectly designed. Most diving is done from a skiff, which also has a wonderful design, complete with four entry-exit points, and a recessed handrail running down the outside of both gunwales so you can hang on while waiting for a ladder or having a divemaster pull off