

(and unyielding on such issues as the occasional dive beyond the recreational limit). The food has improved over the years; they are getting better quality stuff. Nothing fancy, but tasty and filling. The boat itself was showing its age, such as a broken handle in the shower in our stateroom. But that's all scheduled to be fixed when the boat moves to Indonesia. The diving was great. The crew would guide people through the wrecks and would break the group up so as not to overcrowd the penetrations. All smooth. Other than the abundance of jellyfish (always a possibility in July), conditions were terrific. Once we'd all found our Lycra hoods, gloves, etc., we were OK with diving through the jellies.

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

**MV Golden Dawn, August 2005, Clinton Bauder (gecko1@metridium.com), Cupertino, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm, choppy, currents. Excellent trip, worth the expense and travel hassle. Besides the three of us, there were only two other divers. Diving was flat out fantastic on this Wewak to Madang trip. Amazing hard corals, the best and healthiest I've seen. Lots of sharks (grey reef, whitetip reef, blacktip, java, silvertip, bull and scalloped hammerheads) though usually just far enough away that we had trouble getting good pictures. Several turtles. Maybe not so many of the weird muck diving kind of critters but we did see a leaf scorpionfish, a demon stinger and many crocodile flatheads. Cuttlefish and lionfish on most dives. We dove quite a few wrecks,

mostly from WWII including several Japanese Marus and a B25. The Golden Dawn in a nice boat and Captain Crag de Wit is an excellent and enthusiastic host. Food was good enough that I gained about 5 pounds even doing five long dives a day, often in strong currents. Nitrox is filled via a membrane system and helium is available via prior request. Weather was bit rough by tropical standards though this didn't affect the diving much. Dives tended to be relatively advanced so this might not be an itinerary for a beginner. Travel to PNG is not for the faint of heart or light of wallet. Leave time at the beginning of your itinerary in case your baggage doesn't make the same flights as you do. UW Photography Comments: Camera table is a bit small but otherwise fine. Plenty of room for chargers both in the salon and the cabins. TVs that worked with both NTSC and PAL and even a digital projector.

**Paradise Sport, September 2004, Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to Feet. Water: 82 to F, calm, no currents. Unfortunately, someone on the boat brought along a cold and shared it with the rest of us so that most divers spent much of the 10 day trip nursing runny noses, coughs, and general malaise. As a result, I missed about half the dives. I am sure I would have had a better impression of PNG had I not felt so under the weather. I did manage to take a few photos and quite a lot of video. But, I felt that the areas we visited did not live up to the rave reviews. The coral was not particularly spectacular or colorful. I

had expected more soft coral. However, I did enjoy some sites near Kimbe and found the sponges there quite unusual. There were lots of sharks cruising around. We trapped some nautilus that we photographed before releasing. The terrain was interesting with high profile peaks and valleys. The Paradise Sport is a comfortable boat with a good layout. The crew was attentive, food good, and service fine. The dive crew is helpful without being intrusive. Solo diving is allowed for those qualified. I flew in on Air Niugini via Singapore to avoid Qantas or other airlines where there may be severe restriction both for carry on baggage and lower allowance for baggage on PNG domestic flights. As a result, I managed to avoid any charges for excess baggage throughout the trip. UW Photography Comments: There is plenty of room on the dive deck for cameras, housings, charging, rinsing and whatever. The crew was helpful with equipment.

**Paradise Sport, October 2004, Ray Haberman (RHaberman@msn.com), Naperville, IL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 110 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy. One of the nicest dive boats that I have been on and PNG has some of the best diving I've seen. Coral, sponges, reefs and walls are in excellent shape. Lots of fish both large and small. Because it takes some extra effort to get there,, it keeps the less serious divers away. If I would have known beforehand, I would have taken some pencils, crayons, books, magazines, fishhooks and line, etc. for the natives that came to the boat every night after we tied up.

**Paradise Sport, January 2005, Jim**

**Melton (jim@melton.name), Sandy, UT.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, calm, no currents. PNG is everything that it is rumored to be, especially the diving. The reefs around Milne Bay are in excellent condition (no signs of bleaching, over-fishing, or dynamite/cyanide use). The life on some reefs was almost overwhelming, and we saw more new species than anywhere else we've been. Great wall dives, fabulous bommies, but best of all was the muck diving! Fantastic for macro photography, excellent for reef photography, wrong season for "big animal" photography. Second, the Paradise Sport (back in Mike Ball's control) and its crew was outstanding. We've dived several premium live-aboards and believe this is the best we've done. We dived with almost every crew member and they were all great guides, helping us find the most obscure and hard-to-spot critters. The boat was comfortable and roomy, there was always hot water and towels (both of them on the dive deck, too!), and the food was of high quality with plenty of quantity. Food did not suit my personal taste, but everybody else was pleased. Mike Ball's staff (thanks, Tania!) was helpful and arranged our flights from Australia to PNG, as well as a couple of days diving at Loloata Island Resort (near Port Moresby)! The Nitrox system wasn't functioning right and the mixes were from 26% to 31%. No charge at all for Nitrox because of the "inconvenience" Our first muck diving experience: my digital camera turned out not to be a good choice for low-light or night photography (even with strobe), especially macro. Also, we've struggled for years to suss out the expectations for tip-

ping on live-aboards, sometimes badly under-tipping and sometimes badly over-tipping. On this trip we over-tipped rather a lot, but we felt that the service was so great. UW Photography Comments: Dive deck has high shelf to keep equipment dry. Lounge great for O-ring work, etc. Computer provided for downloading and editing digital photos. Photo contest judged by photo pro and divers.

**Paradise Sport, May 2005, Larry Sandusky (lsandusky18@msn.com), Meridian, ID.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 F., calm. Service was superior, crew gracious and helpful without exception, dives excellent and our all-advanced diver/all-Nitrox group was dazzled time and again. No concerns with dive profiles, nothing but positive support from dive crew. Food was outstanding! A shore visit to local village was a highlight and we were greeted with warmth and hospitality. Mike Ball Dive Expeditions is doing a superior job of hosting great dives in PNG! Absolutely loved this trip!

**Paradise Sport, May 2005, Mario Mizrahi (mmizrahi@avantel.net), Mexico, Mex.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: 87 to 88 F, calm. Second trip aboard this ship; the other one was to Milne Bay. I took 13 mostly experienced divers from Mexico and Guatemala. We were treated like royalty by AJ (British Cruise Director) and the rest of the crew. Service and food was twice as good as the year before (this people do listen to comments); as a matter of fact sometimes we felt like we were in a fancy restaurant!, thanks to Warwick the Australian chef.

Everything in this ship is big: rooms, dive equipment and camera facilities, living room (3 TV's), 2 dining areas (in and out), etc. Sam, the Aussie photo pro was helpful and available for tips and everything to do with video or still shots. They have Papuan and Australian "finders" to lead you to a special place or critter. Kimbe Bay combines some of the "muck diving" of Milne Bay with pelagics in the open ocean. We saw nudibranchs, anemone fishes, clownfishes, barracudas, jacks (trevally), unicorn surgeonfishes, emperor, blue girded, six banded and yellowmask angelfishes, pyramid butterflyfishes, batfish, leaf scorpionfish, demon stingers, Napoleon, grey reef, silvertip and whitetip sharks, pigmy seahorses, turtles, lionfish, cuttlefish, snappers, humphead parrotfish, pipefish, squid, juvenile harlequin sweetlips, mandarinfish, clown triggerfish, ribbon eel, etc. Ample space for cameras and charging. Separate rinse tanks for photo equipment. Free and good advise from on board video and photo expert.

**Star Dancer, October 2004, Bridget K Thomas, RN, MSN (divingdocs@aol.com), Wilmington, NC.** It was one of the best live-aboard experiences of my life. Where else in the world can you dive in warm, crystal clear waters with the largest to the smallest creatures in the sea and have an erupting volcano as the background for your ten day trip on a live-aboard? The second dive of the charter can be best described as swimming with a whale shark under the shadow of an active volcano. Saw the largest fish in the sea on our first day of diving along with some of the smallest pygmy seahorses on our remaining

dive days. The diving was pristine and unique; a macro and wide-angle heaven of photographic underwater opportunities. The macro subjects were tiny pygmy horses, panda clown fish, mantis shrimp, leaf scorpion fish, hairy octopus, crocodile fish, a leafy sea dragon, porcelain crabs and countless other unusual critters. Wide-angle photos opportunities were also plentiful with lots of big fish action. Also experienced several thrilling shark feeds, spotted several species of sharks in the open blue water, and experienced the silvery swirls of large groups of jacks, barracudas and tuna. Gorgeous reefs provided colorful scenery of corals, sponges and fish life. ISAM also had a thrilling dolphin encounter when the Captain of Star Dancer herded a massive pod of dolphins alongside snorkelers. The staff of the Star Dancer treated us like royalty. First class service and excellent food. Our personal laundry was even done by the crew and they washed our dive gear at the end of the charter. Another luxury was the wonderful shoulder massages and warm towels awaiting guests after every dive.

**Star Dancer, July 2005, Jill Rain (jrain@rockisland.com), Lopez, WA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 80 Feet. Water: 86 to 88 F. Kimbe Bay itinerary. Smoothly run and mostly comfortable week with plenty of excellent diving. The boat is spacious and luxurious, staffed by crew who make it a memorable experience. There was one problem: excessive diesel fumes in the aft cabins were suffocating at night — I had to spend some nights on deck or with my door open to be able to sleep. However, in every other way it was

exceptionally good. My fellow guests (mostly American) were amicable, the staff (mostly PNG, the rest Aussie ex-pats) genuinely liked and had fun with each other, making for a great atmosphere. The food was abundant, varied and included lots of fresh local fruits, vegetables and fish. Desserts and in-between dive snacks were noteworthy. The dive schedule was perfect: an early sunrise dive (watching the day fish coming to work), then breakfast. Two more dives before lunch, then some lounging/off gassing time before the afternoon and night dives. I liked having the night dive before dinner — this was possible because the sun sets at 6:30 on the equator every day. After showering, you can then relax at dinner with a glass of wine and conversation. There were at least three, sometimes four, divemasters on every dive, for at most 12 divers. They quickly evaluated each diver's skills and "diving personality" and somehow monitored everyone under water at all stages of a dive without ever being heavy-handed or intrusive, so we could enjoy our own experiences, guided or not as we chose. I never felt anyone hovering over me, but there was always a DM nearby to point out unusual things or be helpful. Ensuring safety without being controlling is an admirable skill, especially in strong currents, surge or low viz, which came up now and then. (Any diver who travels so far should understand the connection between currents and tidal range, open ocean and abundance of marine life. Current is a good thing! Expect it — please, no complaints!) We saw on bommies, ridges, walls and beautiful submerged caldera rims densely covered with corals and sponges the full

range of animals from macro to pelagics, too numerous to list. My 8 lbs. of ID books were essential. Huge schools; lots of behavior to watch; the common and the rare; fabulous colors and patterns; adults and juveniles; dawn, day and night populations.

**Telita, April 2005, Walt Brenner (waltbrennero@yahoo.com), Wayne, PA.** The Telita is a perfect live-aboard with only 5 roomy cabins. After a recent refitting it is in tip-top shape, very clean, and everything worked. The captain was Bob Halstead, that icon of PNG diving who has written just about every book on the region and promotes muck diving with a passion. In addition to the captain there was a cook, an “engineer” and two deckhands. Everyone worked their butts off for us to make sure we had the best dives and just the best time possible. Truly a first class operation in every way. Being with Bob was a phenomenal experience. His reputation of being a testy, irascible, curmudgeon couldn’t be farther from the truth. He was terrific company and his stories, at mealtimes kept us entertained for hours. The Chertan met up with us toward the end of the week and Bob mentioned that Neville Colman and Roger Steene were on board. After I expressed some awe at being so near such luminaries, he arranged for us to take a short ride over to meet them. I am not big on hero worship (except for Stan Waterman) but to be in the presence of all those giants of South Pacific diving really made my heart jump. Rob van der Loos was in the wheelhouse calling us to come aboard. Bob knew most dive sites intimately and, a few exploratory ones were a challenge we

all shared with enthusiasm. Diving with Bob Halstead — in Milne Bay — on the Telita — was a real thrill and an unforgettable experience. Probably the highlight was a whole day of diving with mantas at a cleaning station. They came very close and stayed for quite a long time. We also got to dive on two WWII airplane wrecks — a P-40 Kittyhawk and a P-38 Lightning. The P-38, in particular was in pretty good shape. Bob had the history of each sinking which made these dives even more interesting. Then there were the nudibranchs. All I can say is, “wow”! I have lost count of how many new ones (for us) we saw plus several varieties of firefish, barramundi, flatworms, a truly giant bright orange frogfish, pipefish, a wobbecong shark, reef fish — some endemic — and lots more. The muck diving in Milne Bay is excellent and many hours were spent just exploring a few square yards of the bottom. Night dives were equally awesome. And through it all there was Bob Halstead in and out of view beckoning to show us more goodies. For a while it was “fish life overload”. There is a well stocked sea life ID library plus many other books of interest to divers.

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

**Bilikiki, September 2004, Richelle and Kirk Fleischer (richellefleischer@hotmail.com), Norfolk, VA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F., calm. Having experienced over 20 different dive operations throughout the world (over 350 dives), Monty and Michelle’s dive operation on the Bilikiki is the best! You are welcomed and made