

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 wobbegong 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

to feel at home. The boat's layout is fantastic with a large dive deck and open air dining facilities. The lounge area has plenty of space for cameras. Monty's dive briefings were always informative and complete down to the exact location to find rare species. Michelle as the dive guide provided the expertise of consistently locating the hard to find creatures. Both have retained their great enthusiasm and humor often lost in experienced dive operators. They also traveled upon request to locate particular creatures, like the pygmy seahorse. After a week of diving at least 4 times a day, we continued to see new sea life on every dive! Food preferences were taken into account without any hassles. We celebrated one of our birthdays on the boat to much fanfare from the "Bilikiki boys," including a delicious decorated cake! Snacks were always in abundance, including fresh hot chocolate chip cookies and fruit. Rooms were clean and adequate for the voyage. No windows, but en suite bathrooms and shower. Plenty of hot water for showers. Your gear is completely taken care of by the staff. Tenders were available to go diving whenever you were ready. The drivers fantastic at dropping you right onto the dive sites so that little energy was wasted trying to find the site. They were immediately available to pick you up where ever you surfaced.

Bilikiki, April 2005, Steve and Suzanne Turek (divenuts95@netzero.net), Redding, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 200 Feet. Water: 83 to 85F, calm, currents. The crew, as well as managers Michelle and Monty, were attentive and awesome! Nine-night charter. The weather was nice; comfort-

able temperatures. We had a few rain showers, but they passed fairly quickly. Seas were a little rough during the crossings to different islands; however, they were usually calm otherwise. There is a big dive deck at the back, with ample space to hang your wet suits after a dive. There are two big rinse tanks for camera equipment and one rinse tank for everything else. Your "dive station" is yours for the entire time you are on the boat. Each diver has their own plastic tray/basket to put their fins, mask, weight belt, etc. The dive deck also has two fresh-water showers to rinse yourself off after every dive. Warm towels are always available and separate towels are available for your camera gear. You set up your dive gear initially and don't touch it again (unless you are wearing it on a dive!), until you pack to go home. All diving is done via two skiffs, "tinnies". The crew loads all your gear, including your camera equipment, into the tinnie and whisks you away to the dive site, usually close to the mother ship. Entry is via a back roll. There is always a tinnie there to pick you up, wherever you surface, your limousine back to the boat! You hand up your weight belt, fins, BC and tank and then walk up the ladder. Once back at the Bilikiki, the crew removes your gear as well as camera equipment from the tinnie and puts your camera in a rinse tank and puts your gear back at your "dive station." Five dives per day are offered (includes one night dive). Monty or Michelle gave a thorough briefing; they always included a map as well as a list of critters most likely present at the site. You could dive with Monty or Michelle (they are the ones who can find the cool critters!), or you could

dive your own profile. There were no dive restrictions. The diving was good to great. We didn't see too many large pelagics, but did see some reef sharks, several sea turtles and a spotted eagle ray from time to time. The colorful reef fish were plentiful. We would have liked macro critters. Visibility was not as good at some sites (less than 50 ft.), but surpassed 100 feet at others. We dove a couple of World War II wrecks as well as a site that was a supply beach during WWII. Lots of interesting macro critters. The food was good and plentiful. All the meals were served buffet style and all dining was on one of the decks, in open air. Most fresh produce was purchased from villagers that would surround the Bilikiki in their dugout canoes. The Solomon Islander kids are a lot of fun to watch and photograph. The galley crew would provide freshly baked, warm cookies and popcorn after the first morning dive and would provide popcorn and fruit after the first afternoon dive. Chef Michael would always provide me with an alternative when fish was the main course. At 6:00 p.m., "nibblies" or snacks were provided on the sun deck; these nibblies were wonderful! The crew caught a yellow-fin tuna one afternoon, so sashimi was the highlight of one of the evenings! Wine is \$4/glass or \$19/bottle, Australia dollars. The cabins were cleaned daily and roomy. They lacked a porthole, but did include en suite bathrooms and plenty of storage space. All cabins are the same and include a double bed with a twin bunk above. All cabins are air conditioned, but you are not able to control the temperature. The village visits were something not to be missed. The carvings are absolutely

beautiful. We also participated in one of the villages Sing Sings, which is their traditional song and dance. The highlight was dancing with all the kids! Camera room upstairs for charging batteries; two large fresh-water tanks on dive deck; towels provided specifically for photographic equipment; E-6 slide processing available.

Bilikiki, May 2005, Ralph Baker, Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 to 85 F, calm, currents. Pristine. Corals are in excellent shape; the soft corals add to the color. Pygmy seahorses, ghost pipe fish, soft coral crabs, barrel sponge crabs (I always thought that was just "accumulated junk", now I know it is a crab!), pygmy manta rays, cuttle fish, crocodile fish, leaf scorpion fish, sand divers, brotulas, nudibranchs, snake eels and more. A magnifying glass or bifocals will really help those of us over 40. The sharks were small. The black tip sharks are generally in the 3-foot range. I did see one black tip reef shark and one nurse shark that were probably 4 feet long. The turtles are sized like the sharks. Many wall dives, a few muck dives and some cave/cavern dives. One dive takes you inside the island and you surface with jungle over your head. The WWII wrecks are too deep for recreational divers, although we did dive a Japanese tug and some military hardware dumped by GIs. On our first few dives we could hear/feel a volcano erupting under water. Not only were there the booms but you could hear the lava crackling like pop corn as it rapidly cooled in the water. You are left to your own resources while diving. There was a divemaster with every dive, but

you may not see much of them. They would point out something that was fabulous, and depart to find something for another diver. One diver did ask them to give her a tour. She was told she could go with them, but it was her job to stay with them not the other way around. The boat takes on provisions as you travel. This provides a wonderful opportunity to see the locals as they come to the boat in their carved canoes. A couple of divers brought tee shirts and shorts. It was greatly appreciated by those who came to the boat to sell their goods. It gave something of real value and left space in her luggage for souvenirs! The boat is up to the standards of all high end dive boats. You eat outside on the deck. The eating area is covered so when it rains you are protected. They do 5 dives per day from "tinnies." The last afternoon dive is at 5:00 p.m. Normally they would move to a new site for each day time dive. The night dive is at 8:00 p.m. just after dinner. There is an Air Pacific flight from LAX to Nadi, Fiji, there you transfer to another plane that takes you to Honiara. No overnight layovers. 29 hours of continuous travel from the East Coast. You will stop in Vanuatu. Each stop requires you to deplane and wait in the transit lounge. Keep your passport and boarding pass handy. UW Photography Comments: No e-6 processing, no compressed air to blow water off cameras.

Bilikiki, May 2005, Don Acheson (Don.Acheson@verizon.net), Silver Spring, MD. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 Fahrenheit, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Marvelous diving; accommodations excellent; food delicious;

dive operation exceptionally well-organized, safe, and prompt. The exposure to Solomon Island culture is a plus.

Bilikiki, July 2005, Sylvia Seaberg (sseaberg@gmail.com), Mountain View, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, calm, no currents. We chartered the entire boat. Experience ranged from 30 dives to well over 1000 dives. The boat did an amazing job of selecting dive sites that satisfied all skill. From surfacing after the first dive up to our last dive(10 days) our collective mood could be described as ecstatic. Divers manage their own dive profiles and Nitrox is plentiful. Most diving is done from tinnies that depart the mother ship, drop divers and then follow the bubbles until divers surface, a no-brainer. They monitor diving from the deck (in-and-out to ensure all on board) and safe but not micro managed. The walls and bommies are in pristine condition and boast a veritable cornucopia of hard and soft corals, ascidians, sea fans, crinoids and other reef life. We saw endless varieties of small critters, a huge diversity of reef fish, nudibranchs, shrimps, and many others just too numerous to name. Check out the Bilikiki website. Macro opportunities include such oddities as pygmy seahorses, mantis shrimps and Caledonian stingers among others. Wide angle has endless opportunities including wrecks, colorful terrain, schooling barracuda and jack, etc. Boat Mgrs. Monte and Michelle are well-acquainted with critter types and hangouts and share their vast knowledge. They did everything to ensure our satisfaction; when one of our group developed ear problems and

had to limit his scuba Monte took him out on a tinnie to snorkel and film a gray whale. Night dives are usually done while the ship is at anchor; these were quite easy but packed with plenty to see and typically lasted around 75 minutes. We photo wanna-be's were thrilled with our shots...when Monte gives advice, take it. Occasional reef shark, some whales, eagle rays and a manta. The water was warm, most of us wore skins instead of wetsuits, the remainder wore mostly 3-5 mm. Currents were typically slight or nonexistent, except on wrecks where they kicked up mightily (but we were warned). Weather was sun and slight cloudiness, mostly dry with an occasional tropical shower and some breeze. The boat, although old, was stable, comfortable and dry. Cabins were roomy enough for two plus a hefty assortment of large souvenirs. Each cabin had AC and private head/shower. AC not adjustable in-cabin so we had to jury-rig a cardboard diffuser. Cabins/heads cleaned daily. Fabulous dining area is on forward deck, open air but protected, with incredible views from both sides. Salon contains good assortment of critter ID books, local history, photo manuals, novels, etc. The crew was outstanding! Monte and Michelle were kind, friendly, funny, knowledgeable and have a unique relationship with the crew and islanders. They have been with the boat approximately six years. During that time Michelle has provided fruit and veggie seeds to the islands visited by the boat. As a result islanders can grow a variety of produce that the boat purchases at every stop. Michelle's foresight has resulted in economic opportunity for the locals and daily fresh produce for the

boat. Brilliant! Their hands-on style is perpetuated by the rest of the crew; they are sweet, endlessly accommodating, and always available to help. Food was outstanding. All meals included a variety of usual items accented with daily specials. All meals included hot dishes, freshly baked bread, lunches and dinners included fresh fish and a variety of salads. Special diets were happily and imaginatively accommodated; our vegetarians, fish-hater and food allergists were pleased at every meal, inform the boat in advance. Evening hors d'oeuvres were sublime and included fresh sashimi. The meals and snacks were delicious, varied and plentiful. Evening desserts rivaled the best restaurants. The bar stocks plenty of booze, but the wine left a bit to be desired. Although stored correctly on the boat, many bottles of both red and white had gone bad due to heat and/or sunlight exposure and it usually took more than one try to get a decent bottle. Booze and drinks other than water and limeade (delicious and mixes well with rum) cost extra. The boat motors at night to maximize dive times and except one particularly bumpy ride motoring was not unpleasant. Forward cabins will hear the anchor lift and drop so bring ear plugs. Our trip included several island visits where we bartered for/purchased exquisitely carved bowls, figures, tables and other items. I was on the Bilikiki 14 yrs. ago and did not purchase anything to my lasting regret. This time I was prepared with cash, D-cell batteries and T-shirts (and bartered my fanny pack too). Michelle will give a tutorial on quality of craftsmanship and bartering/negotiating techniques. Airfare and boat

costs are not cheap. However, our trip aboard the Bilikiki was one of the best we have ever experienced. You must be self-sufficient so bring your own pharmaceuticals including antibiotics (and leave them with Michelle on your way out). UW Photography Comments: Boat was photo-friendly. Good camera table and other photo accouterments. E-6 film developed quickly. Dive briefings included lens and photo recommendations and dive master Monte was available to lend individual advice.

TONGA

Nai'a, August 2005, John Sommerer, (sommerer@comcast.net), Silver Spring, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 F, calm. Nai'a quality and service up to usual high standards. Best crew on any live-aboard we've been on. Kava party is tops! Cruise directors Josh and Liz pleasant, went the extra mile helping with lost luggage situation, and produced a fantastic trip video. Whales not as plentiful as in 2003, and encounters more limited (some lasted four hours that trip). Some bad weather may explain this, but I can't help thinking that something bad is happening (covert whaling?). Diving was pretty good, especially at night. A few "destination quality" sites (Ladd's Reef and Table for 200), and really healthy hard corals. Tonga whale trip with sites depending on looking for whales. Situation in Tonga is deteriorating. We were there during an extended strike of Government employees, and there is open disapproval of the royal family. Check on current political situation and state of infrastructure before going to Tonga.

UW Photography Comments: Great camera room, rinse tanks, handling and assistance from crew.

Nai'a, August 2005, Bruce Wapen, Foster City, CA. Experience: 400 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 70 to 74 F, choppy. This was basically a "snorkel with the humpback whales" trip — open ocean. That part was great (a 5). The diving was not the attraction.

Nai'a, August 2005, Richard Nelson (chard@alum.calberkeley.org), Oakland, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 75 Fahrenheit, choppy. Terrific boat, friendly, capable, professional crew. The Tonga trips are all about whales, so reef diving was incidental. We were on a charter to develop a whale website for the Imaging Foundation, so we placed more emphasis on whales. Some divers were disappointed that we didn't do more diving, but the crew tried to accommodate, within the parameters of our expedition. Snorkeling with the humpback whales is wonderful. One encounter lasted over an hour, and the photographers got some great pictures. Other encounters were briefer, but still breathtaking. As for the diving, we didn't get to their best sites, but some reefs we visited were good, healthy, and with abundant, diverse fish life. Other sites were merely OK. Nothing difficult or challenging, but it was colder than most people expected. Some of the crew wear drysuits. Light suits were fine for the snorkeling and a couple of dives per day. The food would be great for the five-dive-a-day Fiji schedule, but seemed excessive for the amount of diving we were doing. We felt overfed.