

with what they have to work with, although a fella who was with us on an Intro to Diving experience was taken to 50 feet with the rest of us and suffered bloodshot eyes the next day from mask squeeze. All this for US\$75 for a two-tank dive including all gear (a hodge-podge of hard-used equipment). Or, spend US\$85 at Belluga Divers and you get two tanks, all gear including a computer, and much more comfortable facilities aboard. Same great dive sites, but we were treated to cookies, fresh fruit and coffee between dives. A real pro outfit. I say this even after, through a bit of miscommunication, the dive boat neglected to stop at the Tongan Beach dock to pick me up on their way out one morning. My phone call to the shop resulted in their sending a runabout to ferry me to the dive site. A DM took me in one-on-one for the first dive and then I went in with the others after a decent surface interval. I rate this area right up there with Red Sea diving. Too bad it's 32 hours away from home!

Happy Ha'apai Divers, Sandy Beach Resort, September 2006, Bill Hollister, Petaluma, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy. People go to Tonga to snorkel with humpback whales. There are two main island groups where you are likely to be able to snorkel with the whales: Vava'u and Ha'apai. The Vava'u group has most of the whales, and visitors are much more likely to be able to get into the water with them. But we went to the Ha'apai group — to the Sandy Beach Resort on the island of Foa — because it is reputed to have the best beach in Tonga (our info was that the beaches in the Vava'u group were not good), and shelling and long walks on the beach are an important part of my wife's focus. We spent two weeks. The dive operation is on their property,

although it is an independent operation. The diving is not as good as I have experienced in other Pacific locations: much fewer fish (variety and number), healthy coral, and critters. Two locations were good (Seven Sisters and Akouty), the rest uninteresting. One notable item for photographers is that on these two sites the anthias, fusiliers, wrasse, and butterflies allowed me to get within 1-2 feet of them and literally posing for me. The dive operation is OK, but suffers from serious lack of communication. Several times we expected a normal 4-hour, 2-dive morning on the dive boat, but instead went on an all-day combined dive and whale watch on the catamaran. Not really complaining, but no one bothered telling us. Not customer-centered, although they will allow you to do your own diving once you demonstrate competency. The resort is fine, basic but comfortable cottages on the beach, good food (not much variety). The German owners are willing to help. The beaches (there is another uninhabited small island a 10-15 minute kayak trip away with a nice beach) are nice, and we did get some good shells. For just diving, go to Fiji or other Pacific locations.

CENTRAL AND WESTERN LIVEBOARDS

AUSTRALIA

Explorer Ventures, January 2006, Michael Mould, Lake Park, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. After diving Caribbean only, GBR was magnificent. Bommies make easy diving starting at 100 ft. or so and then

circling the mount to the surface. You see all aspects of the reefs. Book one of the 2 suites on the Nimrod. One has 2 twins, the other a queen with en suite bathrooms. All other cabins below deck with quad share. Ride is extremely smooth. Boat is a catamaran. Only rough ride was crossing over to the Coral Sea. Motion was up and down — no swaying. Needed seat belts in the bunk to keep from being tossed out. Rainy and windy on the crossing, otherwise all other steaming was quit smooth. No real place to lie out in the sun. Only open area was on the bow with some indoor/outdoor carpet. Sun is extremely intense, even for someone from Florida. Can't stress enough how beautiful and vibrant the corals, hard and soft, were. Napoleon wrasse were huge and the unicorn fish unusual. The service was great but avoid the vegemite unless you like axle grease.

ProDive, September 2006, Ian Kennedy (imkenedy@ucdavis.edu), Davis, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy, no currents. This was a 2 night, 3 day, 11 dive trip from Cairns on the GBR. The boat takes about 20 divers in twin bunk cabins. The trip out to the reef was about 3 hours and rough; take motion sickness pill first. I was the oldest guy on the boat, including the crew. The trip catered to young tourists from the UK, Germany, and South America. Many of them were doing their OW certification, a few others AOW. There seemed to be only a couple of other relatively experienced divers on board. I was paired with a diver with only 8 dives who was hard on his air supply, and so I was short on dive time. We visited 2 reefs and both were rather disappointing. The corals were not in great shape and there was not a great deal of life on them. Only one shark

was spotted; several turtles were found, especially on a night dive. The crew were generally helpful and interacted well with the young clientele. Older divers might find some humor a little sophomoric. This was a good boat for new divers but will be disappointing for those who have seen some of the world's great dive sites. A trip farther out on the Coral Sea is probably necessary to see the best that Australia has to offer. Cairns is a fun place to spend some time, along with the surrounding attractions. UW Photography Comments: I had to lift my camera out of the water after a dive by myself. The crew handed me the camera when I entered the water. No other facilities for photography.

Spoilsport, September 2005, D. Demming (ddemming@demmingfinancial.com), Hudson, OH. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 150 to 175 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, calm. Good operation with much better food than the previous trip. Due to stronger currents did not see the same diversity of both dive sites and of critters. We stayed 2 days on the Yongala. The day before we dove Wheeler's Reef 2 divers were blown off the reef and found 8 hours later. We had to abort 4-5 dives because of those conditions. This was quite a contrast from our earlier trip when we just dove incessantly in warmer water with less current. There seemed to be a new commitment by management to improve service since Mike Ball bought back his company.

Spoilsport, November 2005, Mort Rolleston, Washington, DC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F. We embarked out of Townsville to visit sites in the Bowl, Dip, ANZAC, and Wheeler Reefs within the Great Barrier Reef; Flinders Reef

out in the Coral Sea; and the world famous Yongala wreck. It was our first live-aboard experience and we definitely got hooked. Most days had four opportunities to dive – to include night dives. Other than a small treeless islet in Flinders Reef, at which we stopped to explore for a few hours, we did not see land for a week. The night skies were unbelievable so far away from the lights of civilization. The crew, most especially its leader AJ, was top notch, worked hard, and took care of you. They provided as much assistance as you wanted and would guide you or dive with you if you requested or lacked a buddy. They delayed departure to wait for us as our flight was late. One of the crew ran various diver education courses and photos throughout the trip. Dive briefings were detailed and useful and even included detailed site maps on chalkboards. The food was somewhat straightforward, but good and quite varied. The crew also conducted various fun group activities on some nights. The diving ranged from average to the best. The Yongala wreck is truly world class and worth the hype as one of the world's great dives. Because the wreck is an oasis on the otherwise bare ocean floor, was unknown for decades, and has been protected by law for many years, marine life has been able to evolve unmolested. They included mass upon mass of overgrown jacks, jewfish, snapper, pufferfish, sea snakes, turtles, moray eels, Napoleon wrasse, groupers, huge bull rays at night, barracuda, mackerel, baitfish, and on and on. A few bull sharks apparently patrol nearby, though I never saw them. The coral on the ship turned bright orange at night. Unlike the reefs, the coral on the Yongala is mostly soft coral, including some that looked like purple leaves. The coral covering is so dense you hardly

know there is a large intact freighter there. Not far behind were a few dives among truly pristine fields of hard coral (though some was pure white – I assume bleached) of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye can see. The shark feed at Scuba Zoo, while somewhat contrived, was enjoyable as it drew a dozen or so blacktips and reef sharks. They put the sharks' natural food in a garbage can that they move around for 10-15 minutes on a pulley system around the group perched on top of shark cages along the bottom to attract the sharks and give everyone a chance to get up close and personal. They then mechanically lift the lid, from which a long chain with fish on various hooks extends. The sharks pounce on the food in a "frenzy" and after several minutes disappear. A couple of dives involved some impressive steep walls and interesting rock and cave formations. Most of the rest of the diving was among spur and groove like groups of "bommies" or rock formations that raise off the bottom with small canyons between, some better than others. Most of the usual suspects you see in any tropical waters were there. Shark encounters averaged perhaps one whitetip per every other dive. In addition, we did see fusiliers, giant clams, sweetlips, napoleon wrasse, unicornfish, Moorish idols, clownfish, cuttlefish, large red sea cucumbers, lionfish, batfish, triggerfish, and large bumphead parrotfish. Noticeably missing were lobsters, crabs (and most any critter at night for that matter), as well as eels and soft coral. While the Yongala and half dozen other dives as well as the live-aboard experience with Mike Ball were worth the trip, maybe half my 20 dives were not significantly better than my Caribbean diving experience as far as fish life. We had a

great time overall. UW Photography Comments: You could download digital photos on a computer on the ship. plenty of camera only shelves above dive stations and plenty of camera only wash tanks. Several on board had multi-thousand dollar cameras and video cameras and had no problems.

Spoilsport Ball, April 2006, Tracey (trasea@gmail.com), Gaithersburg, MD. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, currents. The reputation the Mike Ball's boat have did not match our experience. Not that it was bad, but I would say it was only OK. We were on a 4 day trip leaving from Cairns, up the ribbon reefs, and out to Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea. Return by small plane from Lizard Island. The first evening, I discovered the bed was soaking. The air conditioner was directly above the bed, and the condensation leaked onto the bed. The hostess got us clean bedding and said she would keep an eye on it. And also, that this happens quite often! They moved us to another cabin, and its air conditioner also leaked, but not nearly so badly. The dive deck was a bit chaotic. They would call the dive briefing, my buddy and I would suit up. And then wait, and wait. We had to wait for a DM to check the reef, currents, etc. They also wanted to have a DM in the water before the rest of us got in, so we waited. My buddy and I were often the first in and the last out. The food was decent, but nothing to write home about. Sometimes it was way too spicy for my taste. The staff was nice and the captain was a hoot. The diving was good. The dives up the ribbon reefs are relatively shallow - 40 to 80 feet. We were looking forward to diving Cod Hole. We were to have 2 afternoon dives and one evening dive there. When we

started our first dive ferried by tender down the reef for a drift style dive back to the boat. During the dive, the tide came rushing in, changing our drift to a freeway. We were moving so fast that it was impossible to do anything except to hang on. All the divers grabbed the anchor line and hung on. After this experience, the DMs decided it was too dangerous to dive again, and we moved to another site for our night dive. The overnight trip out to Osprey Reef is rough, but the dives are worth it. The corals are incredible, almost magical. We were treated to a Shark Feed dive, where you sit in a coral amphitheater and watch the sharks, cods, remoras, and dozens of other fish feeding on the frozen tuna heads. An interesting experience! It was over in about 20 minutes and we were allowed to finish our dive after the feeding. UW Photography Comments: Central table set up for UW photography. They have a computer available for you to use to review the photos, and can make CDs of your photos.

Spoilsport, June 2006, Mark Rosenstein (mar@actwin.com), Cambridge, MA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. The Spoilsport is a large, modern boat. They were pickier about dive limits than other boats I have been on, but I didn't feel that made things any safer. They do not put a guide in the water on every dive, so you are often on your own to spot critters. UW Photography Comments: Not enough electric outlets.

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