

sea lions, seals, octopus, eels, Puget crabs. Great wall diving. Walls are covered with life! This is cold water, strong current, drysuit diving.

God's Pocket, April 2006, Pat Cisar (doccisar@hotmail.com), St. Albert, Alberta. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 42 to 45 F, choppy, currents. Great place for advanced divers. Nice setup and great food. If you have food concerns let them know and accommodations will be made. You must bring your own alcohol. The operators met you in Port Hardy the evening before you start your five-day dive and deliver you back to Port Hardy the morning after your five days of diving. Dive times are tide-dependant as most dives are ebb dives. This is a cold environment and a drysuit is the only way to go. It is remote so bring your own fixes and spares. The marine life is not adequately described in the check boxes above. No tropical fish but lots of bright greenlings and rockfish species, not to mention tons of crabs, sculpins, nudibranchs and so on. Currents are strong so bring your advanced skills. The visibility is great. The resort and diving are hard to get to but the experience is truly world class.

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for the big animal action off uninhabited Cocos Island, 300 miles offshore. Here are challenging, high-tension dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures. Land-based dive operations find a few big animals. However, they're unpredictable and the visibility is often so low you'll

miss them, yet many divers like the diving. Costa Rica has great tourist destinations, is exceptionally safe.

Aguila de Osa Inn, December 2005, Scott Johnson (scottyj96@aol.com), Palm Springs, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm or visibility, 15' to 30' max! Plenty of white tip sharks, jacks, barracuda, puffer fish, etc. There are a lot of fish in these waters ... but you just catch a glimpse of them due to the poor visibility except for the white tip sharks. You had to come right up to them before they moved. Barco was my favorite dive site. The Aguila de Osa Inn has a good dive operation. Vincent is an excellent dive master will let you dive your own profile. If you are coming to this area do not focus entirely on diving, as you will be disappointed. Plan many of the land activities with a few dives. It is one of the most beautiful areas I have been to and if the visibility were 60' to 100' probably would have been good to excellent diving.

Aguila de Osa, April 2006, Kris Carroll (kri21carr@yahoo.com), Bellingham, WA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, no currents. Osa Peninsula is a dense jungle, humid but fantastic foliage with an incredible amount of wildlife. Wild scarlet macaws to 6-foot iguanas Park. Cano Island is an undiscovered jewel. A short 45-min. boat ride from Aguila de Osa Lodge, it had incredible amounts of fish. Schools of fish in the thousands, spadefish, bigeye jacks, yellowtail, etc. Mobulas, which are miniature mantas, schooled in the hundreds. Huge parrotfish, many moray eels, zebra morays and striped morays. Many white tip sharks cruising and sleeping on the floor. Huge amber jacks attacking the various schools of fish.

Saw a 650 lb. Goliath grouper in 40 feet of water! Overall Cano Island was a glorious treat. We were the only divers on the boat (2 of us) and the only divers at the dive sites were us. No currents, lots of thermoclines, no surge. Topography was stunning due to canyons of lava formations.

B J Diving Safaris, Hotel Occidental Grand Papa, November 2005, Thomas Lopatin (tomlopatin@optonline.net), Lake Hopatcong, NJ. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, calm, no currents. Diving was described by dive shop before booking as a "mini-Cocos." This was not the case. There were few large pelagics. However, you are in "puffer fish heaven." I saw hundreds on each dive. The hotel, staff and service were terrific. If you want to get a few mediocre dives in while visiting what topside Costa Rica has to offer (which is a lot!), you won't be disappointed . . . otherwise, go to Cocos. Do a canopy ride and visit the volcano. We also took a day trip to Nicaragua (including Granada, the oldest colonial city in the Americas), which was fascinating.

Deep Blue Diving Adventures, Coco Verde, August 2006, Jack M. Bernstein (jack.bernstein@wright.edu), Englewood, OH. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Deep Blue set us up at the Coco Verde, the hotel at which they are based. The Coco Verde is a former Best Western which has seen better days. The rooms are simple but housekeeping was attentive and cable TV was available. Noise from the street and bar frequently penetrated the thin walls. Nevertheless, at \$65/night (including breakfast) for me, my wife and our 25-year-old daughter, it was a good deal. The town (El Coco) is predominantly a

Costa Rican resort. There are many good restaurants and we easily walked to most of them. We had no bad dinners. El Coco is safe, although not that scenic. The beach is at the end of the road and is a typical black sand Costa Rican beach. It is not for sun bathing and you share it with dogs that run free but don't bother you. We had a 4-wheel drive car and drove to Rincon de la Vieja, a 'non-active' volcano about 75 minutes from El Coco over an abysmal road. We also visited Guatil, a village where everyone makes Chorotega pottery. We went overland (this means that the roads were just pretty bad) to Tamarindo, a surfing town which has too many Americans. Then back to El Coco on one track roads over mountains and across rivers. My wife had her eyes closed for most of the ride. Deep Blue runs a 6 pack operation of sorts and we never had more than 6 divers on the boat. Lady Blue is an old boat but reasonably well kept up. Entry was by back roll (me) or giant stride (my wife and daughter). In addition to Ollie, we also had James (a divemaster and instructor who had just arrived 3 weeks earlier from the Philippines) and Isaac (always helpful in getting your gear on and off and making sure that everything was working). On a trip to the Catalina Islands, Lenin (not Vladimir Ilyich, but a Costa Rican boat captain) piloted the boat. Everyone was solicitous and helpful. Service was as good. Snacks were plentiful and included cookies, fresh pina (pine-apple) and salsa and chips. On our 3 tank dive to the Catalinas, Ollie and the crew hand prepared sandwiches. Here, as my first pacific dive site, I saw tons of things I never saw before. Puffers and porcupine fish were everywhere. Many different types of puffers. An orange seahorse. Octopus hiding in rocks on

most dives. White tip reef sharks on many dives. A green turtle. Tons of king angels. Everywhere Moorish idols. Colorful groupers with vibrant colors. And the devil rays . . . We had an 'Oh my G_d' moment on our first dive in the Catalinas. We got down to roughly 50-60 feet, heading down to 80-100. And looked up. There was a flight of devil rays about 40-50 feet above us. Think WW II bomber squadron. 100-200 rays, but who is counting. And then a second squadron. It was unbelievable. And the starfish strewn across the ocean floor like a carpet. There are many dive sites out of El Coco. The close in sites tend to have varying visibility. I never felt completely blind and things like stingrays and sharks came out of the mist. When we went farther out, we saw eagle rays (quite a few) and huge schools of grunts. We never went to the Bat Islands. On my last dive, there were only myself and two 'Discover Scuba' divers on the boat. Franz, Ollie's wife and co-owner, came on as my dive-buddy pointing out macro critters. We also tacked on an Advanced Open Water course for \$70 each. Good training from James. For surface entertainment, we saw one humpback and calf. Dolphins frequently followed our boat, jumping behind it. Two green turtles mating on the surface by our boat, with a second male trying to get in on the action. The Lady Blue is a small boat. Nevertheless, Ollie, the owner/divemaster, was always accommodating about getting a bucket, albeit small, on the boat for my Ikelite housed Canon 20D.

Dive Safari, Villas Sol, June 2006, William Wittman, Peekskill, NY.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Water: 70 to 75 F, calm. Nice relatively easy diving. Dive Safaris put us more experienced divers on a separate boat so most days

there were 4 divers and the divemaster. Divemaster Kiki did a nice job, helpful and good in the water not pushy or authoritarian. The diving style is definitely relaxed. Entries are a back roll and exits up a side ladder. You could hand up your BC or climb it up the ladder; in my backplate and wings I found it easier to climb up with gear than to get out of the crotch strap and all in the water. Some currents but nothing major. Visibility is generally in the 20-foot range on most dives ranging to perhaps 40. But every once in a while there is the big fish going by. Turtles on almost every dive, lots of morays, plenty of large white tip sharks and some huge stingrays, and saw a school of hundreds of cow-nosed rays streaming by just below us. The longer trip to Catalina Island was well worth it. Water temp was comfortable in a 3mm wetsuit. Villas Sol is a comfortable but not luxurious all-inclusive resort (including alcohol) an exceptional deal. Food was plentiful and decent although certainly not gourmet.

Diving Safaris, Occidental Grand Papagayo, August 2006, David McDougall (dmcdougall@ncbb.net), Newcastle, CA. Experience: 251-500

dives. Vis: 15 to 65 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, surge. Diving Safaris (Not Bill Beards) with Bobbie Joe and Earl, were excellent. The dive masters and boat captains were professional and helpful. The visibility is a little limiting for photography but the abundance and diversity of sea life makes it a great destination. Lots of spotted eagle rays, white tips. Huge schools of grunt and jack. Some nice smaller critters such as Harlequin clown shrimp, frog fish, nudibranchs (various) The Grand Papagayo was an excellent resort with lots of facilities, a gym with 24 hour access, a spa, a pool session for anyone

wishing to try out scuba. The grounds were immaculate with easy access to a private beach. Food was pretty good especially in the Italian and Oriental restaurants. UW Photography Comments: Autofocus was troublesome at time due to all the particulate matter.

Herradura Divers, April 2006, David N Scarborough (david@wan2dive.com), Douglasville, GA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 15 Feet. Water: 78 to 73 F, surge, currents. This dive operation is small and the only one in this area. Very friendly. Had to transfer to second boat to go out to reef. Was not pleased with divemaster, strong current — other diver came up one mile away, divemaster never missed him. They gave a boat briefing and never followed. Other divers on boat did not make second dive, they just asked to be taken to shore. No O2 -first aid kit or fire ext. on board. They said they are only 5 minutes from shores did not need. They had an electrical problem, just wired it together until it smoked. Very concerned about diver safety with this operation. We canceled our remaining two days of diving.

Ocotal Beach Resort, November 2005, Rob Fletcher, Branson, MO. Vis: 50 feet. Water: 73 to 78 F. Made a great decision by flying into Liberia rather than San Jose. Had a 40-minute shuttle to the resort vs. the 4-5 hour drive other guests had from San Jose. Dove for 5 days with visibility quite good enough to observe whitetip sharks, moray eels, turtles, assorted rays and many schools of varied fish. Diving was done exclusively around pinnacle rock formations. We did encounter one pretty coral reef in 15 feet of water, but other than that, expect lots of rocks. Very good dive shop operation – 32 foot boats with a maximum of 10 divers

per boat and always two divemasters in the water with you. One DM leads the group and the other follows for safety. Plenty of beverages, cookies and fruit between dives. Disabled divers take note – these people went out of their way to help our one diver who needed a cane to get around. Ocotal Resort is hilly but has an excellent internal shuttle system to handle the steep slope. Rooms were clean and well equipped with a wall safe, refrigerator, coffee pot, plenty of storage and cable TV with English-speaking channels. Excellent Pacific Ocean view from all units. Breakfast was included with the diving package and featured cooked-to-order omelet in the buffet line. Evening meals were tasty and reasonably priced from a varied menu. Ocotal is about 3 miles out of town so the one restaurant next door (Father Rooster's) added some variety and was also not expensive and good.

Ocotal Beach Resort, August 2006, Craig Wood (craig_a_wood@merck.com), Radnor, PA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. We chose the resort/dive operator based on previous Undercurrent reviews, an extremely informative website, and responsive email communication. Ocotal Beach Resort is in Playa Ocotal, an easy 30 minute drive from the airport in Liberia. It is on a hillside overlooking the beautiful Pacific. We stayed in one of their comfortable bungalow rooms with its own small pool. A delicious buffet breakfast at their restaurant, Roca Bruja, was included. The resort has beautiful grounds, easy access to a nearly private large beach, and a nice small exercise facility. Howler monkeys migrated through the resort frequently and iguanas, lizards, and exotic birds were everywhere. It was a pleasure dealing with Ocotal Diving, near the

beach in the center of the resort. The boats depart from the beach. Check-in was quick and painless. They took our equipment and set up on the boat for each day of diving. They rinsed, dried, and stored the equipment, an incredible luxury. Ocotal Diving has five 32-foot boats, though no more than 2 were used. The boats are reasonably fast and comfortable. They have heads, protected fresh water camera tanks, protected areas, and water, soft drinks and snacks. There are no more than 10 divers with 2 dive masters per boat; we always dived with fewer than the maximum number of divers. We took 6 dives during our stay, 2 local (Aquarium and Shark Point), 2 at Catalina Island (The Wall, Elephant Rock), and 2 at Bat Islands (Big Scare, Black Rock). The diving is mostly volcanic rock rather than hard coral. The sea life was prolific. Some highlights included whitetip reef sharks, devil rays, jewel morays, green morays, reef cornetfish, king angelfish, bumphead parrotfish, and guinea fowl puffers. Unfortunately, the resident bull sharks were absent from our Bat Islands dive but a huge off-season manta ray was a nice consolation prize. During surface intervals we saw mating turtles, humpback whales and porpoises. The personnel of Ocotal Diving were uniformly helpful, considerate, and friendly. We enjoyed getting to know Liv, Diana, and Felipe in the office and Sergio and Diego on the boats. We took a fabulous boat tour of Palo Verde National Park and saw crocodiles, iguanas, bats, white-faced monkeys, and exotic birds including blue heron and egrets. A trip to Rincon de la Vieja National Park was a great way to spend a day and we spotted a coatamundi. We dined at several fine, relatively inexpensive restaurants including Roca Bruja in

the resort, Picante in Bahia Pez Vela (just below Playa Ocotal), Vida (excellent Peruvian food in Playa del Coco), and Father Rooster's (adjacent to the resort in Playa Ocotal). Shopping in Playa del Coco was easy and fun.

Rich Coast Diving, August 2005, Brenda Van Gestel, Willemstad, Curacao. (mvan_gestel@yahoo.com)

Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 23 to 28 Celsius, surge. Costa Rica, both under and above the water, is beautiful, we've even changed our plans and are getting ready to move back to Costa Rica and start our own dive operation. Most dive operations are not to well developed and I think there are great possibilities for us! We had a great dive experience with Rich Coast diving and had lots of fun with the staff. We dove with most operations in Coco, but this one is by far the better one! UW Photography Comments: We took some great shots, especially of all the bullsharks who just ignored us. The visibility is a bit low, but get close to your subject to avoid backscatter.

MEXICO

The sea mounts of the Sea of Cortez have sea lions and occasional schooling hammerheads, though fishing continues to wipe out the big fish. Still, there's good diving from Cabo Pulmo to San Lucas and even farther north operators are getting to the seamounts. 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