

much of the Caribbean. First dive was a tug boat wreck in at 70 feet, teaming with fish and a couple of interesting pass throughs. Second dive was on a shallow reef with lots of juveniles and other small critters, plus a couple of turtles. We had a couple of snorkelers in our group who really enjoyed being 20-30 feet above us. We had drinks and snacks at the bar next to the dive center and then it was back to the ship, where we were dropped off as close as possible to the entrance gate.

**Sandals Royal Caribbean, March 2006, Mike Mew (mike.mew@saintjohn.ca), Saint John, NB.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, surge. The dive boat was excellent, as was the staff. The practice of dropping divers at sites and returning was unnerving to beginners and some experienced. We surfaced after 45 minutes to drift for 10 minutes in 3-4 foot swell. This was due to cutbacks with one boat servicing two resorts. This, in my opinion, is a poor practice as any diving/health incident would escalate with no means of evacuation.

**Sandals Whitehouse, July 2006, Arthur F. Graf, Jr., San Antonio, TX.** A first class, large, self-contained resort. A good hour's drive over not-so-good roads from the airport at Montego Bay. Plenty of good food, evening entertainment (far from the best), many swimming pools with swim-up bars, a long, nice beach kept clean. Many types of water sports equipment, para-sailing, etc. The staff is helpful: All the diving equipment is first class including a good day boat, but that is as far as it goes. They have two 30-minute dives a day: 9:00 AM for beginners and 11:00 AM for advanced divers. Dive the first day and then other days are a repeat of the first. There are several swim-

throughs that are interesting, if you don't mind the bottom-stirring divers ahead of you. The reefs are in bad shape, as they have been over-fished for years and are covered with algae. If you see two fish on a dive, you are doing good. One professional diver that is in the New Jersey emergency rescue squad forgot his C card and instead of giving him a brief checkout dive, they insisted that he take and pay for a resort course.

## MEXICO

Cozumel and Yucatan peninsula diving took a big hit by Hurricane Wilma in September 2005 and diving is still seriously affected, as these Chapbook reporters will testify. About the only good effect was that it slowed down cruise ship arrivals. Many operators cater to experienced, savvy divers — but some load boats with all comers. Much of Cozumel's diving is deep or drift dives. Carry surface-signaling devices (strobe, safety sausage, etc.). The best diving is in spring and summer. It can be rainy during the winter. Accommodations range from small inexpensive downtown hotels to diver hangouts to high dollar hotels. Many divers take day trips to the mainland to dive the freshwater cenotes. Along the coast, there are dive operations from Cancun south, but the diving is mainly patch reef diving. Isla Mujeres, off Cancun, has some decent reef diving and a drift or two. Whale sharks spend several summer weeks northwest of Cancun, near the island of Holbox, where one can just about be guaranteed to snorkel with scores of the behemoths. See *Undercurrent*, October 2004, for a review of this new discovery.

## Cozumel

**Advanced Divers, Casa Mexicana, August 2006, Jack Gibson, Dallas, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Cozumel is still a great Caribbean dive destination in spite of Wilma's attempt to ravage the reefs last year. We have made two short trips there this year, one in February and one in August. Doc Vikingo's *Undercurrent* April 2006 report pretty well summed up what we saw in February: Sand covered reefs and still bewildered fish. By August, much of the sand has blown off the reefs and they seem to be getting back to normal. On our first day at Palancar caves we saw all the usual suspects (gray, queen, and French angels, butterflies, grunts, and puffers) though maybe not in quite the abundance of the recent past. We dove Chankanaab for our second dive, and it was in much better condition than I expected. Yes, some past residents are MIA—but there is still a great abundance of color and life. Our second – and last – day we enjoyed Punta Sur's four caverns on our first dive, starting our deco stop after devil's throat. It is just as spectacular as ever from the school of Jacks at the beginning of the dive to the views of angels silhouetted against the deep blue seen from within the caverns to the nurse shark spotted during our deco stop. Our last dive was at Puerta Maya – the controversial pier that destroyed part of Paradise reef has been converted into an artificial reef by Wilma. What great irony! I was skeptical about this dive, but it was interesting to see the dramatic results of Wilma's wrath on this huge concrete structure (now completely submerged). It is a writhing mass of iron rebar and concrete rocks, blocks, boulders and beams that

is being taken back by the sea. Arrow crabs were common in the debris, trunkfish were numerous, and a spotted moray was hunting among the rocks. We also saw a mantas shrimp and some nudibranchs there. Watch the long term weather forecast and take advantage of one of the deals available from the tour charter groups for a last minute trip during hurricane season. You may find air and hotel for three nights for a little less than \$500 from Dallas. We've been diving with Ricardo Madrigal and his team for over a decade, and these guys take care of you. In the water they are unobtrusive and there only when you need them to point out an interesting creature or navigate the currents. After the first dive, they switch your gear to fresh tanks and take it all down for you at the end of the day. Between dives you enjoy ham sandwiches, fresh fruit, and tostadas with the best fresh guacamole followed by a leisurely siesta for our hour and half surface interval. Ricardo's boat, the *Careyitos*, is a 12 ft wide, 38 ft. long Bertram. Generally there will be no more than 10 divers on board. She doesn't zip out to the reef and back but gives a comfortable and relaxing ride with a large sun deck above and shaded deck below. I always smile to myself when the "fast boats" zip by us, pounding and soaking their passengers. Crowded sites are avoided, and they go out of their way to honor their guests' requests. Your bottom time is limited only by your air supply and computer, 60 minutes or more. If you don't have good consumption, ask Tony to coach you on his safe and effective breathing techniques. Casa Mexicana is in town on the main boulevard by the sea. It is new and clean with nice rooms and great service. An excellent breakfast buffet is included with the room. Advanced Divers' boat has no special

facilities for U/W cameras but will plan on setting up a rinse tank if you ask for it in advance.

**Aldora, Villa Aldora, December 2005, Pec Indman (pec@beyondtheblues.com), San Jose, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 F, calm, currents. It was several months after the island was hit by hurricanes Emily and Wilma. The Reef Club where we usually go was closed, so we stayed at Aldora Divers' Villa Aldora. Normally boat pick up is at the villa, but the hurricane took out the pier. They took us by van to the boat. Kay and Greg, the hosts did everything to make the stay wonderful. The villa is comfortable, has working phones and wireless internet. At the last minute my husband was unable to come, so it was me and my two girls, ages 17 and 11. My younger diver is limited to 40 ft because of her age — no problem. Most of the time it was the three of us and our personal dive master. They would take us to whatever dive site we wanted, even when we kept requesting Yucab. They accommodated our every desire.

**Aldora Divers, March 2006, Rich Orman (richorman@comcast.net), Aurora, CO.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 78 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. The groups are small (no larger than six on a boat) and by using 120 cu ft steel tanks, you are almost guaranteed a long dive every time. The cost is 30-40% more than the cattle boats in Cozumel, but well worth it. I did three two tank dives with them, and the average dive time was about 80 minutes, including a 98 minute night dive! They have a small fleet of boats (I saw five at the pier one morning), and they seem to group divers by experience and ability. All of the dives on the boats I was on used a back-

ward roll entry. Upon exiting the water, divers would remove their BCs in the water and they would be hauled into the boat by the captain. Divers would then climb into the boat on a ladder. All of their tanks use a DIN valve. I dropped off my Scubapro MK25 first stage (yoke) on the night I arrived (they are open until about 9:00 pm), and they had it converted to a DIN the next morning. After my last dive (a night dive), they converted it back to my original yoke in about five minutes while I settled my bill. The morning dives leave the pier (which is in San Miguel about a block north of the McDonalds) at 7:30 a.m. and get back around 1:30 or 2:00. Surface intervals are taken at a beach club called "Playa Mia." Playa Mia is geared toward cruise ship passengers and is noisy and crowded, but they do sell you food, drinks, etc. UW Photography Comments: These small boats are not really set up for serious UWP. The boats are too small for a camera area, and they don't have a rinse tank. I kept wet towels over my housing to keep it moist until I could get it back to my hotel for a good soak in the tub.

**Aldora Divers, Villa Aldora, March 2006, Karen and Tom Prideaux (karen@spatialworks.info), Larkspur, CO.** Experience: Karen 370 dives, Tom 520 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 80-81 F, calm. The sun was mixed with rain the first two days and then it was sunny thereafter. Zero to low current south of International Pier. There was a 3-4 knot current on some advanced dives at Barracuda and San Juan Reefs. The reefs to the north were in much better condition than the south. Reefs at 60' and above were devastated. Below 60', there was hope and promise. Tom and I have been on over 250 dives in Cozumel, and at first, the post-Wilma dives felt like a war zone survey. Everywhere we

turned, sand had buried the reefs. We had to search for positives. Like the 10' anchor from a Spanish galleon that was uncovered near Palancar Gardens. The green moray eels did not seem fazed by the storm, nor did the plethora of nurse sharks under the reef ledges of Punta Sur, Columbia Deep and Barracuda reefs. There was definitely an absence of large groupers, urchins, sea fans, finger corals and sponges. Maracaibo Shallows (80' ft and below) seemed in pristine condition, with black coral, sponges and all that I remember of the Cozumel reefs from pre-Wilma days. We saw eagle rays, turtles and lobsters on almost every dive. We observed some skates mating. Some of the swim-throughs at Punta Sur and Columbia Deep were covered in sand and new ones have emerged. Most of the wonderful Cozumel restaurants and businesses, including the floats, costumes and colors of Carnival were in full swing Aldora Divers had put their boats in dry-dock storage during the storm and were one of the first operators in Cozumel to be back in the water post-Wilma. Villa Aldora, just south of Puerto de Abrigo, is an intimate dive lodge. The latest additions are a vanishing edge pool with a BBQ island and fiesta center. Recommended rooms are the Falice Suite and the Barracuda Suite, all with great ocean views and snorkeling access. The Aldora boats picked us up on-time at the Villa each day. The staff and owners at Villa Aldora are extremely hospitable and informative. Aldora now offers dive plans for exploration of the reefs on the east (windward) side of Isla Cozumel. The Aldora dive masters and managers are organized, communicative, have an excellent breadth of dive education and marine biology experience. Aldora's full-service gear setup with steel 100 and 120s, fast boats, small groups of

similar experience and precise GPS drops, makes Aldora the premier dive shop.

**Aldora Divers, Hotel Cozumel and Resort, March 2006, Craig Wood (craig\_a\_wood@merck.com), Radnor, PA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, currents. We chose Aldora Divers based on *Undercurrent* Chapbook reports, a very informative website, and responsive email communications from Dave Dillehay and Memo Mendoza. Aldora was all we expected and much more. Our trip got off to a rocky start when US Airways left our 3 pieces of luggage in Philadelphia. We were met at the airport and later at our hotel by Aldora employee and Villa Aldora manager, Greg. He drove us into town, and directed us to where we could purchase the items needed to begin our vacation sans luggage. Registration with Memo set us up with rental gear to use on the 1st day; good equipment, Dive Rite BCs and Oceanic regulators and computers. Pick-up every morning was on time at 7:40-7:45 in one of the 5 Aldora boats. The early start and fast boats ensured that we were the 1st, often the only boat on site. Equipment was set up before pick-up every day and changes were performed by the divemaster on route or at the surface interval. All equipment other than wetsuits were kept, rinsed clean and dried. Eliminating the need to transport and care for gear daily was an incredible pleasure. Then there were the 120 cu ft, high pressure steel cylinders. We have DIN regulators but Aldora now also has some cylinders with yoke valves. We did 11 ocean dives and 2 cenote dives. First dives were with air, second dives and our single night dive were with 32% EAN. The nitrox cylinders were first analyzed at the shop and labeled and were then analyzed on

the boat for diver verification. Average bottom time for 1st dives was 1:08 and for 2nd dives it was 1:24. Fleece lined long jackets were supplied on the boats on several windy days. Surface intervals were generally taken at the Playa Mia Resort, for just short of 2 hours. Though 1st dives were generally deeper than 2nd dives, the long surface intervals allowed for deeper 2nd dives than are often offered. First dives ranged in depth from 85-127 feet and 2nd dives ranged from 58-93 feet. The food at Playa Mia was said to be expensive, we didn't eat there but chose to bask in the sun. Memo showed up at several surface intervals to ensure that all diving was going smoothly and to plan for subsequent days of diving. We dove with 2 great divemasters, Mario and Mateo. Both were extremely skilled and experienced. Briefings were concise, informative and accurate. The divemasters led the drift dives and deployed a surface marker at 45 minutes to facilitate boat pickup. We were picked up promptly and smoothly at the end of each dive. We were always placed on boats with other divers of our skill level and diving goals. We dove with no more than 6 divers on the boat and often dove with 4. The divemasters solicited site preferences, offering an alternative they thought would be superior based on conditions. Every diver's 1st experience at Devil's Throat must be a thrill and the brisk current and gorgeous reefs at Punta Tunich and Barracuda were incredible. Tormentos and San Juan were more damaged by hurricane Wilma and will need more time to recover. There were turtles on nearly every dive and nurse sharks, green and spotted morays, spiny lobsters, southern stingrays, yellow stingrays, spotted eagle rays, scrawled and white-spotted filefish, sharpnose

puffers, porcupine fish, honeycomb and scrawled cowfish, spotted drums, queen and ocean triggerfish, queen, midnight, blue and stoplight parrotfish, queen, gray, and French angelfish, yellowhead jawfish, and splendid toadfish. We spent a day diving the Dos Ojos cenote with Mateo, an accomplished cave diver. These cavern dives do not require cave certification. We took an early morning ferry to Playa Del Carmen and then rode in an air-conditioned van to the cenote, south of Xel-Ha. The 76-degree fresh water was crystal clear with nearly infinite visibility. The stalactites, stalagmites, columns, and other formations have to be seen to be believed. We surfaced once in a fantastic bat cave. The dives are done with 80 cu ft aluminum cylinders and last just short of an hour. The 2 dives are on different rope marked routes. Maximum depths were 25 and 32 feet. Memo did not charge us for the rental gear we needed on the 1st day.

**Aldora Divers, Fiesta Americana, April 2006, Jorge More ([more@mcs.anl.gov](mailto:more@mcs.anl.gov)), Downers Grove, IL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. Diving: Aldora Divers takes care of your equipment, and you only have to worry about your wet suit. They use 100cuft tanks, and this allows long dives. I regularly came up after 1 hour with a third of the tank full. I was diving with an old 5mm and a 3mm vest, and was fine. But I get cold easily. I dove 3 days. Both divemasters, Mario and Luis were excellent. The underground topography is dominated by sand, and it looks like a lunar landscape. But outstanding, relaxed diving. On one of the dives we saw an unforgettable sight: An eagle ray diving into the sand, getting a mouthful of clams and repeating the process several times. This happened on Palancar Bricks: Fi-

esta Americana is about \$6 out of town. It is a nice place, but it does not have a beach. But it does have scuba diving facilities. We ate at La Perlita, La Choza, and La Mission. All of them were excellent. In general the food improves as you get farther from the coast.

**Aldora, Reef Club, May 2006, Buddy McEachern (buddymeachern@msn.com), St. Charles, MO.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, currents. Aldora is the best dive operation I've used in all my years of diving. My 12-year-old daughter is a jr. OW diver with only 10 dives. Aldora gave her the attention she deserved. The Divemaster (Mario) made sure every dive she made was something she would always remember just by the "little" things he would do for her. The boats were small and fast. We had no more than 5 divers on boats that would hold 10 - 12 divers. Aldora will set up all the dive gear on each tank, exchange tanks, clean, and store all your equipment. Kay (staff member) met us at the airport and give us directions to the dive shop to drop off our gear. The entire staff treated my family as if we have always been diving with them. They cost a little more than the "cattle boat" type operations in Cozumel. However, for not having to carry dive gear everywhere, getting to select the dive sites we wanted to go on, the hour long dives we had (they use steel tanks), for the service and safety they provide, and for the attention we received, it was well worth it.

**Aldora Divers, Iberostar Cozumel, June 2006, Blake and Traci Hardy (jbhmedic@cox.net), Pflugerville, TX.** Vis: 80-+120 feet, Water: 82-85° F. Aldora instills comfort and confidence from the beginning. Greg (manager) called us the day before we left and

met us at the airport. Memo handled all details of a heavy dive schedule (+18 hours underwater in 5 dive days) and checked on us during several surface intervals at Playa Mia. Memo ensured there were no complications, always willing to "bring the mountain to Mohammed." Aldora only places a maximum of 6 divers on any trip and our group of 4 had the boat to ourselves most days. Louis was our divemaster, though he is more like a dive concierge. Ever the consummate professional, Louis ensured we were where we wanted to be and that everything was safely and smoothly run. We were allowed to dive our own profiles (and with the steel 120 tanks, many dives were over 1 hour 10 minutes, even deep dives). All dives are computer run and the Nitrox is accurately prepared. Louis locates the most difficult and spectacular creatures (and cleaning the reefs as he finds opportunities). The reefs are recovering spectacularly. We were there after Emily, before Wilma, and there is not much changed since then. The shallower reefs have lots of sand and some broken, dead corals. But new growth is already evident and the system is flourishing. Turtles, nurse sharks, toadfish and eagle rays abound. Numerous octopi also. There were no disappointing dives (Maricaibo seems untouched). The Iberostar, on the far south end of the island, has rebuilt besides the landscaping (which needs to grow back now) there is no sign of damage. The staff and the facility were excellent. The beach distance to the water has been increased by 30 feet making for a much nicer beach. Modern, card-reader-secured doors have been added to the palapa topped accommodations. But the marble and hardwoods inside are unchanged. Still lots of rocks off the beach, but they make for great snorkel-

ing as they attract lots of fish.

**Aldora Divers, Villa Aldora, July 2006, Jill Rain (jrain@rockisland.com), Lopez, WA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: 85 F. Fourth return visit to Cozumel. Aldora: not cheap but good value. Villa Aldora, a mile and half north of town center (cab, or walk half hour), has 9 units, on the water, quiet, homey, sunsets and lounging, easy pick-up by Aldora boats and dealing with dive logistics. All units have cooking facilities, AC, good plumbing, and free phone/wireless internet access. Management gracious and helpful, friendly atmosphere. Bring cash/traveler's checks — can't pay with credit card. Good snorkeling out front. Town pretty empty except for cruises during the day (ships anchor off-shore now, docks sunk); good deals at restaurants. Aldora consistently good. Fast boats, early departure, 6 divers per boat max, usually less. Rarely saw other divers underwater. Aldora has scratched certain sites off their list since hurricane Wilma due to damage on shallower reefs. Palancar/Columbia/Punta Sur still excellent, second dives often at Santa Rosa/San Francisco also in great shape. Fragile corals and sponges thrashed and littering the bottom, lots of new sand drifts. Some fish dependent on those have declined (like trumpetfish), others have proliferated (algae/coral munchers). Far more juveniles (esp. angelfish, drum, trunkfish, damselfish). Many more turtles. Some sharks and eagle rays. Diversity and numbers of fish overall is about the same. Still the largest at depth. Signs of recovery everywhere (inch high purple sea fans, etc.). I've drifted Cozumel reefs for 10 years now and it was fascinating to see the dynamics of disaster natural succession at work. These reefs still have the most dramatic and intricate deep formations

anywhere.

**Aldora, August 2006, David Cutler (dave@precision-performance.com), Idaho Falls, ID.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 82 F, currents. This was my first trip back to Cozumel in about 10 years. This is now a big city (because of the cruise ships I am sure.) I don't know if this is all bad as the economy looks robust but the island has lost some of the charm for me. Storm damage has taken its toll on the diving as well as the island, but I suspect the island will recover before the reef. Lots more big turtles than I remember, not as many big groupers, but this was the first time I have seen dolphins diving Cozumel. Aldora Divers is the best operation I have been with anywhere. Briefings were to the point. Boat was fast, reasonably dry, usually 4 to 6 divers. As someone who prefers to set up my own gear I had to adjust my ways some what. This was my first time diving with 120s and although the extra air is great I had a hard time adjusting to the extra weight on my back. The bigger tank always seemed to be rolling me inverted. Positioning the tank higher on my BC seemed to help. As usual I took about 10 lbs. of clothes that I didn't need. Take quick dry swim suits, shorts, tank tops, and tee shirts for formal dinners.

**Anita Divers, Casa del Mar, July 2006, Pat and Larry Bailey, Eldon, MO. (lacyfern50@hotmail.com)** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80+ F. Friday thru Friday flight/resort package through Worry-free and were pleased with Casa del Mar, one of about 10 choices of places to stay. We arranged our dive days after we arrived. Normally we go with Advanced Divers/Careyitos, but we were only able to book three days with

them. They introduced us to Anita Divers, who also depart from the Caleta around 9:AM. We were impressed. The boat is spacious, has a head, big sun deck, partially covered main deck, is clean and well maintained, and best of all, a friendly, helpful, accommodating crew. We got to choose the sites, dive our profile and return to a wonderful lunch which included guacamole and pico de gallo, lots of fresh fruits, chips, tortillas, sandwiches, water/juice/soda. We saw more turtles than ever before. And also a few eagle rays. The currents were mild and temps perfect. Between the 3 of us, we wore as little as half ml skin up to 3 ml shortie. As for beginner divers, we would recommend Anita. They are safety conscience and eager to share their knowledge/experience with all divers. They have no specific spaces/tanks/tables etc for cameras, but if you let them know you need something special, they will do whatever it takes to make you happy.

**Aqua Safari, Casa Mexicana, November 2005, Tracey (trasea@gmail.com), Gaithersburg, MD.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, currents. We came to Cozumel only a month after Wilma. The town was pretty much back up on its feet Aqua Safari usually has 4 boats in the water each day, but during our first week, there were often only 4 people aboard the one boat that was out for the day. Aqua Safari did what they could to see that we were enjoyed every dive. The reefs had been hit hard. Sand was covering everything except the lowest depths. It was like someone turned the color down. Almost every barrel sponge had been broken off. The fish were about, and lots of sharks, schools of spotted eagle rays. We were able to find some smaller species, blennies, jawfish, etc. It was still

a worthwhile dive. Plenty of things to see and it was fun exploring the sites to see what changes had occurred. We stayed nearby at the Casa Mexicana. This is a nice resort. They offer a buffet style breakfast. A nice way to get started before the dive each day. They have internet available and if you are close enough to the office, you may even get wireless in your room. UW Photography Comments: Only a rinse bucket that is supposed to be reserved for cameras, but often is used by everyone.

**Aqua Safari, Safari Inn, November 2005, Nick Macelletti (NMacelletti@AOL.com), Unionville, CT.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy, no currents. We were the first commercial boat out after hurricane "Wilma" 3 weeks before. Did 16 dives on a variety of reefs. We were three divers and there were three crew members on an Aqua Safari boat that has a capacity of 28 passengers. For the first 3 days there were no other boats in sight. Weather good, current mild. The soft corals, tube and rope sponges, fans, and even barrel sponges were 90 % gone. There were no remnants other than the occasional broken purple vase sponge. Spotted eagle rays, stingrays, turtles, nurse sharks, large barracuda, large groupers, a 3 foot porcupine fish, lobster, crab, and supermale rainbow parrots were seen on almost every dive. We frequently saw lobsters walking across the sand. A dive buddy photographed an octopus out in the open. The hard corals in the 40 to 60 foot range did have sand on them. The deeper reefs, especially the walls at 80 to 100 feet were intact and mostly clean of sand although every now and then you would come upon a massive piece of the wall that had fallen to the sand below from the force of unimaginably powerful surge. On one dive to Palancar

Gardens we came upon a section on the bottom at 90 feet where the sand had been swept from the base of the coral pinnacles for a depth of about 15-20 feet exposing coral that the divemaster/instructor said had been covered by the sand for tens if not hundreds of years. Safari Inn downtown was clean and spacious, and had a great time with a bucket of 6 Coronas in the square going for \$5 and all the great restaurants open and almost no cruise ships.

**Aqua Safari, February 2006, Lisa Losack (llhearts@aol.com), Chandler, TX.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. One has to admire the work ethic to restore this island to pre storm condition. Our group completed 19 dives during the week and everyone thoroughly enjoyed every minute. You will need a full 3mm wetsuit. Shallow reefs do have the sandy coating that appears to “stick.” Up close and personal with the reef produces thousands of tiny fish, worms, egg sacks, jelly fish ... life! Mid-depth reefs seem to have the same coating, yet, rejuvenation of the reef is growing above the sand. It was discussed in our group several times the abundance of fish teeming the reef. Devil’s Throat was totally different. Palancar Gardens breathtaking. C-53 is a must! Aqua Safari and Hotel Mexicana are a great combination for Cozumel divers. Excellent service from both. A wonderful breakfast buffet daily in the hotel and superior diving leadership from a well-established company. Safety and fun all rolled into one! Night diving produced the largest crab and eels I have ever seen in my life! The divemasters were even interested in the upside-down, under a shelf monster crab.

**Aqua Safari, Careyitos, Hotel Cozumel, February/March 2006, Ron and**

**Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.** Experience: 450 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, strong currents. Hurricane caused massive damage. Hotel Cozumel fixed totally; many resorts not open. Some restaurants just opened recently. Nothing crowded compared with the usual crowds at this time of year. Diving was still great – tons of sea life (large and small). Shallow reefs sanded over (looked like a snow storm). Deeper reefs, coral not as bad. Lost all big sea fans in storm.

**Aqua Safari, Bel Mar Hotel, March 2006, Cindy Naiditch, Chichester, NH.** Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 75 F, currents. As new divers (7 dives for me, 25 for my partner), I was nervous about my first boat dive, my first salt water experience, and, later, my first night dive. The staff and crew of Aqua Safari couldn’t be beat for consideration, helpful hints, and keeping a close eye on my partner and me, while allowing more experienced divers to dive their own computer/profiles. They asked us to notify the divemaster when we reached 700psi in our tanks, which gave us “newbies” a comfortable safety zone for surfacing. Assistance in getting back on the boat was greatly appreciated. While we were always the first to surface, we were never made to feel like we had messed up the other divers’ diving experience. Aqua Safari has their own pier across the street from the shop, making it an easy on/off process. All gear was rinsed and stored in their facilities. The Bel Mar was next door to the shop. The hotel was clean, the staff was courteous, and the continental breakfast appreciated. The hotel had both a safe and a small refrigerator, allowing us to store snacks and lunch food. The reefs took a bit of battering in the hurricane and sand in and on the coral was evident. The continual “invi-

tations” to come into the shops became extremely irritating, causing us to walk along the water side of the street rather than brave the shopkeepers’ assaults.

**Aqua Safari, Hotel Cozumel, June 2006, Rick Tuss (rtuss@aol.com), Wilmington, DE.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 82 F. I wasn’t impressed. The hotel was ok, the people were friendly, and the dive operation was clean and competent. The boats are slow and the better dive sites are far to the South. I saw enough of Paradise Reef . . . must be the only remaining shallow reef with any coral. Cozumel is not cheap! There are much better Caribbean locations offering better value for money. There were at least 3 cruise ships docked every day . . . what a nightmare. Since there were few large animals, high speed drifts don’t allow you to enjoy the macro.

**Aqua Safari, Amigo’s B&B, Suites Bahia, June 2006, Francis and Deb Bollag (debbollag@earthlink.net), New Rochelle, NY.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. Aqua Safari has recently put much effort into delivering better dives for experienced customers who have computers. In two weeks of diving, we had only one dive that was under an hour. As long as we follow the plan and buddy system, monitor profiles (it’s easy to go into deco, especially on second tanks — nitrox is an available option), and remain reasonably close behind the group, the DMs are quite willing to let us relax, spread out and dive our own dives. They hang out at 15 feet until we drift up to them for our safety stops. If you like long dives, learn to drift slower than the main group. DMs don’t enjoy chasing swimmers. Aqua Safari is professional in every respect: Everyone is experienced and

skilled in his or her job, every detail is seen to, boats and equipment are well maintained, communication is constant and the operation zings. They don’t shorten their surface intervals to make the schedule. If the boat stays out longer, that’s OK. Most mornings, the owner goes to each pick-up pier to greet his divers and help them board. And the shop can supply or help with whatever you need: Equipment service, accessories, instruction or advice. We took the Reef Fish ID course, which was a lot of fun. A.S. is a PADI IDC and offers a full range of courses. Classes are small and personalized and they work them around (or into) your dive schedule. We went out on both the big boats and the fast boat. Big boats are rarely filled to capacity and there’s plenty of roaming room on each. They have sun decks as well as protected, interior seating and marine heads. There are two divemasters which allows groups to split into fast and slow drifters and spread out along the reef. There’s no “big-group” feel to the trips except for the initial water entry and descent since they want everyone to descend, check buoyancy, solve any problems and approach the reef together. Belinda, the fast boat, is an inboard diesel that holds 8 divers, one DM and her captain. She’s much more comfortable than an open panga and has a swim platform and ladder. The premium for a two-tank trip is only \$5. Trips start ½ hour earlier and take about an hour less than those on the big boats. The diving is similar to the big boats. Belinda makes two 2-tank trips each day. Reserve in advance. Aqua Safari’s afternoon 3rd tank is the bargain of the century. It’s only \$9 besides a morning 2-tank trip. The DMs will ask for sign ups after the second morning dive. Amigo’s a great, budget alternative to a hotel! Located

in a residential area of El Centro, it's within walking distance of everything. There's a large garden and nice, swimmable pool. The property is quiet and private and lovely. Its three guest rooms are in two buildings at the back of the property. Each room has a private entrance with sitting porch and hammock. Rooms are bright and clean with private baths, fully-equipped kitchenettes, air conditioning and ceiling fans. There's a community palapa living/dining area with TV, DVD player, games, books plus a large kitchen. Beds are comfortable. Plenty of hot water and good showers. Continental breakfast, 6 days of maid service and free wifi internet access (with your computer) included. After Amigo's, returning to our usual haunt, Suites Bahia, was a letdown. Yes, the central, waterfront location can't be beat and the rates are low, but it felt confining. Four-story, elevator building. Ours was a balcony room: Two queen beds, air conditioning, cable TV, kitchenette, fridge and AC Wilma. Continental breakfast, maid service and unlimited use of hotel computer included in rate.

**Blue Angel, Caribe Blu Hotel, January 2006, Gary Schmincke, Catonsville, MD.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 to 76 F, choppy. They have knowledgeable dive masters that are helpful and care about their customers. We had to take taxis to the marina as their pier was not yet repaired from Wilma. They handled the situation well, though it was not always smooth. Entry was the back entry roll from the side of the boat. No limits on time, but return with at least 500 psi. Tanks were filled to 3000-3200 psi. You normally take off your BC in the water and pass it to the divemaster who pulls it up out of the water. They had only bottled water on-board. The surface

interval was at one of the southern beaches, like Sanchos or San Francisco. Shore diving was okay, we saw some damage and debris on the near shore reefs. We did see squid, spotted drum, and spotted morays right by the dive shop. Overall the diving was good. I did see damage on most of the shallow reefs. Fish life was good, but I didn't see any large grouper. The Caribe Blu Hotel was a nice small, but basic hotel. Ask for a refrigerator for your room. All the doors, sliding doors, beds, A/C units were replaced after Wilma. The bed was firm. The help staff was friendly and helpful. The restaurant on site only serves breakfast and lunch. I went in town to Chedraui, the closest grocery store in San Miguel and bought things to eat. Caribe Blu and Blue Angel treat their staff well.

**Blue Angel, Caribe Blu, June 2006, Steve Woerner (swoerner@att.net), Huffman, TX.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. Hotel and Dive operations have recovered nicely from the hurricane. Shallow reefs are damaged rather severely but signs of recovery are evident. Deeper reefs have a lot of sand but are still a great dive. Jorge and Matt were excellent dive masters. The briefings were complete and suggestions on dive sites were right on the mark. the dive boat, No Problem was roomy and comfortable with a shaded area and a sun deck for available. The boat crew was always available to set up gear and help in and out of the water. We dove our own profiles and all levels of experience were accommodated.

**Blue Bubble, January 2006, Jim (4jr@cox.net), Gilbert, AZ.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, choppy. The first day our captain took a while to find us

drifting because he was too busy fishing. The second day we had to endure him vomiting from a hangover between dives. The third day he lost us and left us drifting at sea for 45 minutes. Finally after kicking 1.5 miles, we reached another dive boat. Our captain arrived 15 minutes later after we called him on the radio. Buy the large tube signaling devices, not the small one. Everyone should have a signaling device, not just the divemaster. Blue Bubble never offered an apology — only a new captain on the next day. They felt it was not a big deal. Drifting in a 6 knot current for 45 minutes in 3000 feet of water is a big deal!

**Blue XT Sea, Suites Bahia, January 2006, Brian Maxim (bmaxim@sympatico.ca), Kanata, ON.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm, choppy, currents. : Only two divers, except for one other on one day. Long dives. Some interesting wildlife. Fast boat. Some nice swimthroughs and drift diving. Liked the hotel (lots of room). Good restaurants. Great cenote dives, esp. Taj Mahal. No problems with the rental car. Only got lost once. Blown out two days. Strong current/downwelling that forced us in a lot of swimthroughs (for safety). Currents reversed (saw the same scenery twice). Swam through “sandstorms.” Cozumel was more urban/populated than we expected. Driving is not a “wonderful” adventure — some roads are pretty bad - had to leave and go home. I take too many clothes. UW Photography Comments: No fresh water rinse container - there was a bucket that my housing didn't fit in. Forgot to take the camera lens cap off on one dive, almost opened the housing up at 80 fsw, but then thought about it — not a good idea!

**Blue XT Sea Diving, Fiesta Americana Dive Resort, May 2006, Karen Driskill (kdriskill63@yahoo.com), Torrance, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 125 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Fast boats. One 6 pax and one 8 pax. The most divers we ever had was 6; most of the time it was only 4. The other divers we met while diving with Blue XT were all nice, funny, and accomplished divers. Both boats are covered, have lights for night diving and the larger one (Bandito II) has a private bathroom/ changing area (if needed). Had both Adan and Mago as our Captains. Their accuracy at hitting the reefs was perfect. Their assistance and patience helping us with our gear was wonderful. Our dive masters (DM) were above excellent — Pedro Pablo, Alan, and Arturo. These guys are amazing at spotting animals 100 feet away. Words cannot explain the comfort we felt knowing that we were diving with some of the island's safest and best DMs. And let me not forget to mention how handsome the entire crew is! Surface interval well timed, always on a beach with snacks, H2O, and juice. My favorite was the abandoned house—lots of interesting spiders and a caved in bottom floor. The wall dives were breathtaking, the swim throughs were fun, and the drifts thrilling. Outside of the night dives, Maricaibo Fingers and Santa Rosa Walls were our favorites and least affected by the hurricane. Most of the shallow dives had quite a bit of sand and damage, but we always saw a lot of creatures. Each dive buddy team is allowed to dive their computers. Most if not all dives lasted 60-70 minutes. Dry towels were provided after each dive and the sunshine was free! Hotel: Fiesta Americana a 15 minute ride from the airport. Room: 7th floor. 1st impression was of a large clean room with a king-sized bed, table with chairs, lots

of storage and a wonderful balcony with an awesome view. OK, so the toilet was only 4 inches from the wall but the view made up for the lack of knee space. Small per diem mini bar (kind of pricey). No refrigerator in our room but ice machine down the hall. Lots of clean towels supplied twice a day and upon request. The air-conditioning was adequate but we keep our doors open most the time for the awesome breeze that whipped though. No bugs. There is an in room safe but you have to pay a daily fee for usage (this kind of bugged me considering most guests have to store passports, cash, jewelry, etc.). And yes thankfully there is a coffeepot in each room. Beach: Beautiful, soft sand above a mostly limestone shore, plentiful palapas with lots of glorious shade. Beach bar has great bar and food service and they will deliver to your palapa. Bring your sand shoes for beach entry and exit. There is a wonderful on site pier where dive/snorkel boats pick up and drop off customers. For divers/snorkelers/swimmers there is a rinse tank and warm fresh water shower right off the pier. Just note that the beach current runs from strong to non existent. I recommend a short walk north to Dzul Ha and a slow drift dive/snorkel/swim back to the pier. The Reef is where breakfast and lunch buffets are served. We felt the food was consistently good but lacked the variety of the Iberostar or Palace resorts. Tropical Forest is the primary dinner buffet. Food was consistently good and the menu varied around a nightly theme. 3rd The Hacienda Miramar. This is the fancy restaurant, food, service and ambience was wonderful. All bar staff and waiters were friendly and attentive. There is a swim up bar at the main pool. Both pools appeared clean and the main pool had planned activities.

We did play volleyball and bingo one day! The only downside to the pools is the lack of shade. I asked for an umbrella and they did not have any.

**Bottom Time Divers, El Cid La Ceiba, June 2006, Dennis Boesen, Albuquerque, NM.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. Bottom Time Divers provided superb service. The fast boat had a cover, and could hold a maximum of 6 divers. We had a group of 4 divers, and we were the only ones on the boat except for one day. Bottom Time Divers was flexible about dive sites, times, pickup location, etc. Divemaster Raul was professional, thorough, and helpful. They cleaned our gear at the end of each day and had it set up and ready to go on the boat the next morning. They provided clean towels on the boat and bottled water, fruit, and snacks. Diving was excellent, aided by Raul's knowledge of the Cozumel reef systems. On one dive we saw a large eagle ray, two large turtles, seahorse, cruising nurse shark, yellow stingrays, flounder, nudibranchs, large groupers, angels, butterflyfish, triggerfish, grunts, parrotfish, and many others large and small. The shallower reefs had some sand covering from Hurricane Wilma, but marine life is abundant and visibility is great. La Ceiba resort has been extensively remodeled and is clean, comfortable, and staffed by friendly and attentive people. The only drawback is the pressure to attend their timeshare presentation. Once you attend or make it clear you don't want to, they usually don't push the subject again. On-site photo shop at La Ceiba provides excellent support and advice, and can provide developing and printing (for dinosaurs like me who still use film) and sales and rental gear.

**Careyitos Advanced Divers, February**

**2006, Karen Donahue, Hood River, OR.** Experience: 0-25 dives. Water: choppy. In February I learned to dive with Ricardo Madrigal and his crew - the Careyitos Advanced Divers team. Could not have had a better learning experience. In our group of five friends, only one of us was an experienced diver, two of us were getting certified, and two were way out of practice. Though I know this boat takes out the most experienced of divers, Tony and Cielo were excellent and patient instructors for we two newbies, as well. Ricardo made sure we all were safe and brought on extra divers for one-on-one reinforcements when they were needed. As I fumbled with unfamiliar equipment and tried to remember which button to push or cord to pull, Cielo was always close to reassure or give instruction. During my twelve dives, and once I was certified, he graciously encouraged my new-found underwater freedom. By the twelfth dive I felt quite confident and independent with my new skills, though, when I got too close to a creature with large claws, or was otherwise acting weird, a gentle tug reminded me that professionals were close by and ready to help. They made sure too that we never missed that lovely eagle ray, or nurse shark or the myriad strange and fantastic creatures of the sea. We all loved the boat, the unhurried atmosphere, the sun deck, the food (best salsa and guacamole in Cozumel), and most of all the people.

**Caribbean Divers, Occidental Allegro, August 2006, Jas. McNutt, Dallas, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents. Occidental Allegro is 3-4 star all-inclusive with good facilities. We did not use the on-site dive operation. We used Caribbean Divers and they

were great. Good boats, great personnel, well-planned dives and safety oriented. Focused on small groups and taking you to see and do what you want. They limit the number of divers on each boat and have topnotch staff onboard. They did great quick equipment repair when we needed it! The Occidental Allegro is a good, reasonably priced all-inclusive resort. Small rooms but good beds, clean, good staff that really made the effort to please. Food was great in all of the restaurants at the facility. Bars just kept flowing! Boats were equipped with rinse tanks and plenty of room to prep and rinse camera equipment. Onshore facilities at Allegro were good, but the onsite diving outfit was pretty upset that we didn't dive with them. The rinse rack and tanks were good, but the idiots from Palancar Divers tried to block us from using the facilities until I called the hotel manager!

**Deep Blue, Living Underwater, Hotel Bahia, November 2005, Peter/Sandy Oemichen (pnoemichen@gmail.com), Oregon, WI.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy. Deep Blue did a fine job of accommodating divers under less than ideal circumstances, providing the transportation and handling all our gear. They were eager to please. (The captain even took my suggestion to approach divers with the motors downwind so divers waiting to board didn't have to breathe exhaust fumes.) We were responsible for schlepping our own gear at their shop after the dives and were able to store all our gear there. However, nothing dried because of poor ventilation so we pretended we were on a Blackbeard live-aboard. Deep Blue's boats are covered pangas that accommodate 8 divers comfortably. Oxygen kits were on board. The pre-dive briefings were adequate indicating

max depth, general overview of the dive site, demonstrating preferred hand signals and so forth. Safety rules were simple. Don't go deeper than the dive master, don't get ahead of him, let him know when you're at 1000 psi and be at your safety stop with 500 psi. You backroll in and use a boarding ladder to climb back aboard. Surface intervals were taken at what was left of a pier in the marine park. Water and fruit were provided. The underwater environment was changed. The soft corals really took it on the chin on the shallower sites. In fact, several dive sites are off limits needing time to "heal." Deeper dive sites were less disturbed but you could still see changes at depth as well. We were pleasantly surprised by the fish population. Deep Blue staff also confirmed that the number of fish was on the rise indicating that they were moving back into the reef and resuming their normal patterns. (The hurricane apparently scatters them.) Schools of the usual suspects (French grunts, school masters, Bermuda chubs, Creole wrasse) were common as were sightings of the other reef fish you expect. We saw turtles on almost every dive, barracudas (one school of 10), 3 or 4 nurse sharks, a few eagle rays, several splendid toadfish, lots of lobsters, crabs and so on. We also saw a few grassy seahorses and a couple pipe fish. We also noted several colonies of yellowhead jawfish — a family favorite. In fact, my daughter found a banded jawfish. In fact, we didn't notice a serious drop off in fish until it came to the blennies. There were few.

**Deep Blue, El Cantil Sur Condominiums, March 2006, Addie Reed (alynnreed@hotmail.com), Corpus Christi, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, calm, choppy. Deborah (owner) runs an extremely efficient and profes-

sional operation. The front office is accommodating and knowledgeable; the most pleasant diving experience we've ever had. When we preferred an early departure, Deborah was on the phone immediately and found another couple who also wanted to get an early start—this was at 8 p.m. the evening before! We dove all of our dives except two (we dove a total of 10) with Sandro as our divemaster. Sandro was competent, friendly, and knowledgeable. With a collective 2500 dives between the four in our party, we found him to be professional, with the rare ability to be completely unobtrusive while also pointing out creatures we would have surely missed on our own. He fit into our group perfectly. Sandro (divemaster) adept at pointing out marine life.

**Deep Exposure, June 2006, Carl McDaniels (Lracmcd@msn.com), Green Valley, AZ.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 F. The boat is large, roomy, and comfortably fitted to suit all divers. The boat staff and dive masters are warm, friendly, and committed to providing a great diving experience. A full lunch is provided between dives during the surface interval. If diving on multiple days, all equipment is cleaned by staff and securely stored for the next day.

**Dive House, Fiesta Americana Cozumel Dive Resort, March 2006, Ron Jyring, Bismarck, ND.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, currents. Hotel was good and met our needs: not luxurious, but comfortable and a good value. There were a lot of flies around the buffet area. My youngest son often sat on the pier to avoid them. Staff and service were outstanding. Dive House was on site, convenient, competent, but not as exceptional as on our trip in Jan 2005.

In contrast to Doc Vikingo's report in *Undercurrent* 21:4, we were surprised by the lack of apparent hurricane damage to the reefs (except during shore dives), especially when compared to the destruction on the surface. Had a new digital camera. The combination of shutter lag and fast current resulted in many blurred and offset photos. At times I wished for my old film camera with its instant shutter release.

**Dive House, Caribbean Princess, May 2006, Paul and Donna Lima (plintn@hotmail.com), Christiana, TN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, no currents. Booked a shore dive through Caribbean Princess and had good luck with Dive House. Our divemaster, David, was excellent, giving a thorough briefing on the drift diving necessary in Cozumel. Some people on board became anxious because of the thoroughness and the discussion of various possible contingencies. They asked what we wanted to dive and based on consensus went to Santa Rosa Wall for the swimthroughs. It was a long (50 minute) trip out but testament to their willingness to provide a quality experience for people who would dive with them once and then sail away. We went in two groups, each group waiting on the surface and then descending en masse to remain together in the significant current. I was impressed with the constant counting of divers by the lead and sweep divemasters. Entering a swimthrough, another (inexperienced) diver cut in front and entered. Suddenly he lost his weight belt, which landed directly in front of my mask. He ended up on the ceiling. I started to grab the weight belt but the sweep divemaster came up and rapidly reattached the weight belt to the diver. This is not the place for divers with 8 dives! The diver

later he said he had panicked after the incident and had been highly anxious in the relentless current. At the end of the dive we moved onto sand flats, surfaced as a group and were picked up by the boat which had been trailing our bubbles. Dive House which had good equipment, a roomy boat and excellent safety procedures. They provided bottle water and soft drinks and attentive service. As soon someone had finished a soft drink, a crew member was there to take the empty and stow it.

**Dive Palancar, Occidental Grand, June 2006, Ed Stevens (Angelfish@aol.com), Austin, TX.** Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 150 to 200 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, choppy. We have tried many resorts in Cozumel and decided to try an "all inclusive" resort. We were pleasantly surprised. The food at the Occidental Grand surpassed my expectations. The rooms were wonderful as was the service. Dive Palancar boats were not crowded and the divers were divided into two groups. Normally there were only 6 or 7 divers in our group. The divemasters went out of their way to find sharks, lobsters, crabs, and turtles.

**Dive Palancar, Occidental Grand Cozumel, August 2006, Robert Morris (morriss1@wyeth.com), Wayne, PA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, currents. Due to the great numbers of divers in Cozumel, get together with a small number of advanced divers and you may be able to do some more exclusive sites farther out or some that are really only for experienced divers like "Devil's Throat" (Punta Sur). This is a coral tunnel complex that starts at 80 ft. and twists and turns down to the exit at 130 ft. Not many fish but interesting. Requires a light and you will need to do a short decompression due to the time below

100ft. The reefs were in fairly good condition considering Hurricane Wilma spent 50 hours on Cozumel. Some broken coral and some sand in odd places on the walls. But many normal Caribbean fish and in great numbers! Not much large life other than turtles, nurse sharks and southern stingrays. Mostly drift dives in strong current; you cover a lot of reef and so you see a lot. Some unusual fish included large eye toadfish, splendid toadfish (endemic to Cozumel), sargassum triggerfish and yellow stingray. Also saw queen angels and cowfish in apparently mating behavior. No camera-only rinse buckets were provided and no area to lay equipment out between dives. A little difficult to compose images while drifting fast over the reef.

**Dive Paradise, September 2005, J. A. McCormack (pharmajohn@sbcglobal.net), Campbell, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 72 to 75 F, choppy. Traveling on Norwegian Dream, had signed up for Cozumel 2 tank dive through ship vendor had included in form had prior asthma since had 350 dives ship said should be no problem. Vendor on dock, refused. Went out on Main St., found Dive Paradise, no problem, at all, set me up with 1 tank @ \$35.00. helpful, competent. Suggest you carry an MD's diver approval note with you on all further trips.

**Dive Paradise, January 2006, Gilda and Warren Sprung (wl@gildasprung.com), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. Boat condition excellent, divemaster Jaime is the best we've had in 20 years of diving. Hurricane did move sand onto some reefs, but others have coral exposed because of the storm that have been covered for

decades! Great diving as always, and Dive Paradise is the best.

**Dive Paradise, Hotel Casa Mexicana, February 2006, Tom Rain (tomrain1@hotmail.com), Irving, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, calm. Hurricane Wilma recovery has gone quickly. Most hotels are operational again. The dive operations are working normally. The downtown area is also back to normal except for a few restaurants that remain vacant. The diving was good, though we were not taken to some shallower reefs probably due to damage there. There was sand on most reefs. The marine life seemed more abundant on the shallow reefs. Saw many turtles, two eagle rays, and a nurse shark.

**Dive Paradise, Cozumel Hotel and Resort, February 2006, Marjorie Griffing (mjgriffing@comcast.net), Shoreview, MN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, choppy, currents. The resort has recovered nicely from Wilma. The most obvious evidence of the hurricane was the lack of trees: It was difficult to find shade. The rooms continue to be spacious and set up well for divers. We booked AI because it was convenient. The food was better than our last stay 15 months ago. While not gourmet by any means, it was tasty, plentiful and available at convenient times. Concerns about cleanliness were obvious. We did 13 dives in 5 days with Dive Paradise. The shallow reefs were obviously damaged by Wilma. Tormentos and Paradise were especially damaged – it was like diving over snow drifts. We could see some evidence of the corals trying to reestablish themselves, but mostly everything was covered with sand. Barrel sponges were filled with sand. Deeper dives didn't look nearly as damaged and

the fish were as plentiful as ever. We saw turtles on most dives. After several days, people asked the DM to stop pointing out lobsters since we had seen so many of them. On our last dive, two spotted eagle rays entertained us on the safety stop. They each had a wing span of at least 6 feet and swam around under us for nearly the entire 3 minutes. They were beautiful! The dive operation was somewhat hit or miss depending who was on the boat, both in terms of the DMs and the fellow divers. Alfonso (DM) was great! Once he figured out we were competent, he let us do our thing. During the morning dives, the operation usually did a good job of grouping divers of like experience on boats and within groups on the boats. Once everyone was on the boat, a consensus of where to dive was reached. We were mostly able to dive our computers' limits. In the afternoon, however, there was no attempt at grouping people appropriately. The sent out as few boats with as many people as possible on them. While we enjoyed looking at the fish in their natural habitat doing their own thing, other divers seemed to enjoy swimming headlong into a school of fish on purpose to scatter them. I suspect they lit bugs on fire with a magnifying glass as kids! One afternoon, we objected to diving Villa Blanca wall again and it seemed we were to be punished – we were dropped over sand with virtually nothing to see – it was at least 4 minutes into the dive before we saw anything living. On the last morning, 4 of the 12 divers on the boat had made some pre-arrangements with Dive Paradise. There was no attempt to reach any consensus – the entire boat went where they wanted to dive. They were the first group in and last group out. We were required to come up after 30 minutes though we had 1500+ PSI

left so that the boat would be ready to pick up the first group per its prearrangement. The eagle rays noted above almost made up for the fact that someone else was controlling our dives. UW Photography Comments: Some boats had large tanks for cameras. Others only had buckets for masks that were used by cameras. No tables or dry area to change film.

**Dive Paradise, Hotel Cozumel, June 2006, Donald F. Bradley (scupsdad@aol.com), York, PA.**

Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 81 to 85 F, strong currents. Dive shop close to the hotel – short walk through tunnel. Nice variety of dive sites. Best was Palancar Gardens. Deep site but super swim-throughs. Boat crew was excellent. Very helpful to the older divers in our group from Lancaster Scuba Center. Divemasters stayed close to our less-experienced divers. Drift diving was a lot of fun and fast. Resort is almost 100% repaired from hurricanes. Destroyed cruise ship pier makes an interesting dive. Nice boat, good crew, good food, good resort. All meals and liquor included in package. Great value! Rental scooters were in excellent condition.

**Dive Paradise, Hotel Barracuda, August 2006, Watt Hinson (whinson@sbcglobal.net), Houston, TX.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: calm. Excellent trip. We were concerned that the recent addition of the pool and swim up bar at the Barracuda would be a negative. The pool was added after Wilma and caters to cruise ship crew personnel and hotel guests. We came to enjoy both the pool and the bar. It was great to meet new people, other than divers, and the ability to get a drink or snack without having to clean up after diving was a major

plus. After about 5:00 pm, the crowd clears out and the music shifts more toward jazz. I've always enjoyed a drink after dinner and the bar made that a definite plus. Dove with Dive Paradise on their fast boats and EDP boats. The diving was good, although weather and currents varied. The best dives were at Maricao Shallows, La Francesca and a couple of dives on the mainland reefs. We saw at least 25 turtles on the mainland dive! These were all on EDP boats. The fast boats had fairly inexperienced divers on board, but this was by design, since some friends of ours flew down for their first open water boat dives. The DMs let us dive our own profile after the inexperienced divers surfaced.

**Dive Paradise, Hotel Barracuda, September 2006, Julie Tayloe (jttayloe@sbcglobal.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, calm. I visit Cozumel about 3-6 times yearly. The beds at the Barracuda are new, and as hard as the old ones. The hotel has updated with a new pool and bar, but has a tendency to get loud with locals, their children and cruise ship passengers. Hurricane Wilma's effects are still evident both above and below water: Fauna is returning, as are the fish, the coral has a lot of sand on it, but it is coming back. Dive Paradise offers a boat ride to dive the shore of the mainland and the area is a turtle lover's paradise.

**Dive with Cristina, April 2006, Linda Shore (lshore@mayerbrownrowe.com), Washington, DC.** Experience: 26-50 dives. We had booked a dive with Cristina to coordinate with our cruise ship's schedule. As of the date we left, we were the only ones booked that day. Despite our best efforts, we were 45 minutes later than we had expected

due to difficulties docking in Cozumel. Unfortunately, Cristina had not told us that she would leave at a particular time, so we arranged for babysitting, were the first people off the ship, and made it to the marina (a \$15 ride away) only to discover that she had left with other divers 15 minutes earlier. The marina operator called to Cristina's boat, who said that they would come back for us and would be there in 10 minutes, so we let our cab go. Several minutes later, they called the marina to report that they wouldn't return for us after all. We ended up stranded in a remote marina, loaded with dive gear, for quite sometime while we tried to get a cab to return us to our ship.

**Dive With Martin, December 2005, Randy Klumph, Salem, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 95 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, surge. Dive With Martins is all about taking care of their customers. While damage to the reefs is to be expected, we enjoyed the new swim throughs, increased numbers of large fish, and large schools of smaller fish. We saw multiple turtles on every dive, and barracuda. On one particular dive we counted 15 morays, some swimming. We also saw eagle rays on almost every dive. The DMs at Martin's are masters at finding interesting critters and sharing their knowledge of the island. Our group was the only to book a third afternoon dive each day so we opted to turn it into a "salvage" dive — a fun aspect of the trip. We assisted in removing some debris in the more damaged areas.

**Dive with Martin, Hotel Cozumel, March 2006, Jack Hall (eyesguy@aol.com), Ripon, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. We were originally scheduled to go to Cozumel in October

2005, the week that Hurricane Wilma hit. When we rescheduled for March 2006, because of unrepaired hurricane damage the only place we could stay was Hotel Cozumel much further away (about 2 miles). I called Martin and asked if this would be a problem and whether he could pick us up at the dock, and he said "No problem." For the first night dive, when I called to see what time they would pick me up, I was told to get a cab to the cruise ship dock. I pointed out that I had been told I would be picked up, so he relented and picked me up and returned me to the hotel's dock. For the second night dive they again said that I had to get myself to the cruise ship dock and I pointed out to him that he had agreed to pick me up at the hotel dock, so he relented. At the end of the dive, I was put out at the cruise ship dock and told to get a cab home! I protested to Martin (who claimed that he was not Martin), but to no avail. So I had to get a cab home with my gear. This was a poor way to treat a guest. The Hotel Cozumel was newly renovated thanks to Wilma. The room was nice and had a layout conducive to breezes and had a drying rack on the small balcony.

**Dive with Martin, Casa Del Mar, April 2006, Dr. Patricia McGarry, Fenton, MI.** Experience: 150+ dives. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm and flat. Dive with Martin gave tanks and regulators to other operator who lost everything like Papa Hog's and they are now in business. We stayed at Casa Del Mar and they are open and even better than ever. They are sharing piers. Atlantis was great in letting dive operators use theirs when they didn't need it. Our divemaster was David and he is great.

**Dive with Martin, El Cid La Ceiba, September 2006, Tonya Zander**

(tzander@carolina.rr.com), Charlotte, NC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 120 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, calm, currents. This was our 8th trip to Cozumel. DWM is a small operation with personal attention. The owner greeted us almost every morning making sure our dive week was progressing well. He has fast small boats with some shade. You do backwards entry rolls, and there is a ladder to climb onboard after handing up your weights, BCD/tank, then your fins. We dove with the same divers all week (5 total), had the same excellent dive master (David), and only changed boats/captain once the whole week! We were offered cold Gatorade, bottled water, watermelon, cantaloupe, papaya, fresh-made guacamole and/or tuna salad each day with chips, and granola bars. We also were given a loaf of bread, packs of ham and cheese with mayo and mustard to make our own sandwiches. Divers pick the dive sites of the day (if it is within the group's experience level). If the current is not too swift, then that's where you go. The deep dives like Palancar Caves and Bricks, Columbia, and Punta Sur Cathedral, had awesome swim throughs that allowed us to marvel at the huge formations that had not been damaged from last year's Hurricane Wilma. There was some sand deposited, but the view was still magnificent! The 2nd/3rd dives of the day like La Francesa, Palancar Shallows, Santa Rosa Shallows, Las Palmas, Paradise, and San Juan each had broken areas from last year's Wilma, but instead of focusing on that we just kept watching for the next turtle, nurse shark, barracuda, king crab, lobster, huge rainbow parrotfish, massive sized groupers, eagle rays, sting rays, scorpion fish, and/or the splendid toadfish. The coral reefs are mesmerizing as you glide with the wonderful easy/lazy

drift diving. DWM goes to a gorgeous beach area where the boat can tie up for your hour to 1 hour 30 minute surface intervals. We loved that 3 dives could be completed from 7:30AM boat departure to around 1:30PM to 2:00PM return times. Our DM also made us 2 DVD's to bring home. Over 5 days of 16 dives, I averaged 53 minutes bottom time that was so enjoyable due to the small dive group and excellent DM. His shop is currently just inside the damaged International Cruise ship pier while their shop is being reconstructed. [www.divewithmartin.com](http://www.divewithmartin.com). The La Ceiba was fabulous too. Our welcome with Gabby was a pleasant treat. Our room was spacious with a kitchenette, 2 balconies, a king size bed, huge garden tub, separate shower area, and 2 sinks. The quiet walk in beach with the waterfall into the ocean is a tranquil area, plus they have a Jacuzzi with swim-up bar, nice size pool, hammocks in the shade under the pool deck, a big man-made beach area with sun/shade areas, beach volleyball, and steps into the ocean with hand rails. The plane wreck is still out there, but much smaller now. The hotel's dive boat pier was still being reconstructed, so we simply walked next door to board our dive boat. It's a \$4 taxi ride into the town square area for dinners at our favorite local restaurants, but \$5 back to the hotel.

**Dressel Divers, Iberostar Cozumel, June 2006, Dr. Michael Pangelinan** ([surfpange@yahoo.com](mailto:surfpange@yahoo.com)), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 90 to 120 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. I went with my pregnant and not diving wife and 12month old daughter so we chose Iberostar for the resort and not for the dive operator. I completed the DPV (diver propulsion vehicle) and Nitrox classes there. DPVs are useful in moving around through

current and tight swimthroughs. Ian, Michael Sanchez, Paul, and Alex were excellent DMs and instructors. The boat captains and crew were good but only water was offered. Tanks were changed out for us and weights were available on the boat. The boat crew made for easy giant strides (not back-roll and they handed us our camera gear) and exits from the large day boats. Ladders were secure and we merely had to hand up our camera gear and fins and were helped aboard. Iberostar is far south and close to the main dive sites — at most, 15-min. rides — but more around 5min. from the dock. I did not observe any divers being hassled by Dressel for being picked up by other dive boat operators as was previously reported. This is not a dive operator for divers wanting freedom to roam! Groups were kept small w/4-6 divers/DM and close due to stronger than normal current. Aluminum 80's were used and dive times were 50min on the first deeper wall dives (down to 90') and over 60min on the shallower reef dives. I wore a 3mm and ended a few excellent dives early (at 70min!) due to the cold. As current was strong little to no effort was required unless you wanted to photograph sometime on top of or beside the reef or wall (staying behind the wall out of the current made for easy photography.) The reefs still have a lot of sand on top from Hurricane Wilma last year but are coming back. We dove the classic dives at Columbia Deep, and Shallows, Palancar Gardens, Bricks, Horseshoe, and Caves, Paso del Coeral, Punta Dalila, and several others. In general, the shallower second dives were much better and more heavily populated. We saw nurse sharks, small mantas, turtles, and large grouper on virtually every dive. The Cozumel toadfish, lobsters (some surrounding

the swimthroughs), small barracuda, and seahorses were the other highlights. Dressel Divers Cozumel were professional and excellent! They were warm and greeted me by first name from the first day. No separate rinse tanks for cameras and gear. Boats were strictly day boats. Surface intervals were often at the resort, a 5'-10' ride back.

**Dressel Divers, Iberostar Riviera Maya, August 2006, Frank Nelson (teach1@nb.net), N. Huntingdon, PA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. Searching the Internet I found their mother company in Spain, which offered a 15% discount if booked through them before departure. They sent an email receipt that you had to download and copy. Quality of receipt was not good. Arriving at the shop I was told I would have to do a check-out dive. No one in Spain told me this. It was a waste of time and money considering my experience. Watching other divers who already had the checkout were a disgrace (buoyancy problems, gauges dangling, no concern for other divers, cattleboat). These few divers should not have been on/in any type of water. Though I had purchased a package from the mother company, I was looked at strangely. I purchased a few cenote dives and the treatment was better; however, the quality of divers left a little to be desired especially in an overhead environment. The divemasters were fluent in English and were well equipped and knowledgeable. Even with the poor divers the DM still kept his cool and professionalism. I did learn that he was obligated by Dressel to take the paying divers to the cenote because it was money for the shop.

**Hotel Barracuda, April 2006, Jerrod Harrison.** I led a group of 9 to Cozumel

for 8 nights. Our group consisted of two divemasters (myself included) and a professional photographer. The reefs definitely took a beating. I noticed a big difference at all depths down to 95ft. There was an overall lack of color, even at shallow depths. I was hard pressed to get a decent underwater photo with color that wasn't muted or blued out entirely. There was sand where there was previously no sand. It looked to me like it had snowed underwater. There was also a great deal of sand and other particulate in the water, making visibility less. However, I did see quite a bit of animal life. We saw at least one turtle on almost every dive, several eagle rays, several golden spotted eels, lots of Cozumel toadfish, a nurse shark and the normal assortment of barracuda, grouper and colorful reef fish. In fact, our night dive was incredible. We saw lots of crabs and lobsters, two octopi, a turtle, several eels and a cuttle fish. The Barracuda now has a pool with swim-up bar that also serves snacks. The bar is completely independent of the hotel and run separately. They have knocked out some walls through the hotel to create a separate entrance directly from the street to the bar. Therefore, cruise passengers, locals and other tourists constantly flowed from the street. My wife and I happened to get room #104 that is literally 12 feet from the bar. Now, if I was 19 and on spring break, it would have been great. But we prefer a more laid back, quiet vacation and that is why we liked Barracuda in the past. I could never get away from the noise and commotion. It was especially crowded and loud on Saturdays and Sundays. It made us feel unwelcome at our own hotel. In fact, every time I went into my room on the weekend I had to clear people off my patio because they treated it as part of

the pool area. At one point, we were playing cards and had to relocate to the lobby because the crowd got down-right rude—they were loud, drunk and obnoxious, splashing our game, bumping into us, knocking our things off the table, etc. Even the bar staff was giving us dirty looks because we weren't spending enough money.

**Liquid Blue Divers, Private Villa, Hotel Cozumel, December 2005, Wayne and Beckie Whittier (wayno921@satx.rr.com), New Braunfels, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 85 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm, surge, currents. Cozumel Vacation Rentals found us a wonderful villa within walking distance of San Miguel Square. This was our maiden voyage with dive operators Liquid Blue Divers owned by Roberto and Michaela. After a week with them, we will never dive with anyone else in Cozumel again. Their attention to detail is first class; rinsing and cleaning your gear nightly, towels and jackets on the boat, intervals at a beach restaurant and providing 120cf steel tanks that allow longer bottom times at deeper depths than most other dive operations. We were always the first boat to the dive site each morning, giving Roberto the opportunity to point out numerous creature sightings that would hide once all the other boats would arrive. Underwater geography has changed some due to the hurricane and some of corals on the formations will take time to heal.

**Liquid Blue, Deep Exposure, Casa Del Mar, June 2006, Sherald and Randy Vogt.** My husband and I are fairly new to scuba diving. Casa Del Mar staff were wonderful and the rooms are nice. This time we had a contest with the maid making towel animals. She made a wonderful shark one day. She used towels and the caps off the shampoo

bottles. We dove with Liquid Blue the first day and Deep Exposure the second day. They were both great dive operators. Liquid Blue has a small boat and goes out about an hour before everyone else. They have different tanks than aluminum 80s. The tanks have more air so our bottom time was extended. The dive master also has the ability to share air if someone gets low faster than the others. Our dive master was helpful and gave us a refresher on buoyancy. We had lunch at a beach club that was reasonable, with great fish tacos. Deep Exposure also great. They have a big boat but take no more than 12 persons. There were only 5 divers and 2 dive masters. The only thing that bothered me were the interactions of the other dive master and a female diver. They serve lunch. I prefer buying my lunch at the beach club because I do not care for sandwiches. They had great guacamole. Both accommodating and helpful.

**Living Underwater, April 2006, Lori Brown, Justin Brown Green (DoctorSLB2001@yahoo.com), Bellevue, WA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, currents. Cozumel is still recovering from Hurricane Wilma and it was a bit of a frightful sight. There was rubble from the storm everywhere. Most establishments in Punta Langosta were still closed and many stores along the main drag were under repair. We have been diving with Jeremy for years but we had never been on a dive like this before. Jeremy calls it The Turtle Dive, about a 30-40 minute ride from the marina (La Caleta) close to the shore of the mainland. This was a flat patchy coral area with fairly high currents. As we prepared to get in the water, we saw two turtles coming up for a breath. But this was nothing compared with the hordes of turtles we saw on this

dive. There were turtles everywhere we looked. When we passed a group of turtles, another group of turtles would appear in the distance. Sometimes we could spot them from a great distance because there was a cloud of fish above them. In all the years we have been diving in Cozumel, we have never saw so many turtles. The second dive was near X-Caret. It was a pleasant dive with plenty of overhangs and big schools of grunts and silver fish hiding beneath. Jeremy mentioned that he planned to start doing more diving on the east coast of Cozumel. I think this decision was in part because of the damage to the reef on the west side from Hurricane Wilma. There is a definite need for the reefs around Cozumel to get some rest and relaxation to recuperate from the storm.

**Living Underwater, Fiesta Americana, April 2006, Paulino Gonzalez (scubaextreme@hotmail.com), New Port Richey, FL.** Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 80 to 125 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Fast boat, great Captain eager to please, got to best dive sites before other boats arrived. Did the Devils Throat 3 times at divers' request. Helped clean some corals that were choked with sand. Jeremy always would find the best dive sites away from crowds, was not afraid to take you on more advanced dives if you could show good skills. All dives were over 1 hour since he uses 100 cf tanks, helped a lot with people who use a lot of air. Jeremy made diving Cozumel extraordinary. Fish population in Cozumel has decreased compared with previous trip in 2000. Corals have also been impacted, possibly by large number of cruise ships visiting daily. Recovery after a large Hurricane was remarkable.

**Living Under Water, August 2006, Al-**

**vin and Renee Taylor (atnrt@ipa.net), Bella Vista, AR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, no currents. The owner, Jeremy Anschel, is solely responsible for the success of LU. The service is the best. He washes our gear each day and it's ready for the next morning's dive. He provides water/soda/fresh fruit/cookies and dry towels between dives. Parkas are provided if you are cold/or if it's raining, also seat cushions for the fast boat ride to the dive site are provided. After our night dive – hot chocolate.

**Living Underwater, Hotel Cozumel, September 2006, Sam Jones (smjffpc@aol.com), Fairfax Station, VA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, choppy. In seven years of diving, Jeremy and his crew provided the best customer service we've ever experienced. For our 2 days of diving, my wife, daughter and I had the dive operation to ourselves. The boat was well organized and Jeremy was always inquiring about ways that he could make the dives and our experience more enjoyable. He was safety conscience and always providing tips on how to improve our diving (a born teacher!). This was the first time any of us had used steel 120s. Jeremy exhibited extensive knowledge of every dive site we visited and was astute at finding even the smallest critters. At no time did we feel rushed and we had ample time to explore every nook and cranny we desired. During surface intervals, he provided plenty of cold drinks, fresh fruit and other snacks.

**Manta Divers, September 2005, Lanny Oden (LannyAriz@aol.com), Tempe, AZ.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm, choppy, currents. This day (16 Sep.) was a holi-

day celebrating Mexico's independence from Spain. Apparently, it is customary to start celebrating on the eve before the holiday. Much like New Year's Eve. And the whole city participated! Even our Skipper seemed to have partied well into the night, because on the morning dive he was a bit grumpy and slow to read some wakes and waves on the ocean. As such, we were tossed about rather violently a few times. Our first dive went well. Everything worked out as planned. The second dive Miguel sent up his dive sausage as before, just before our ascent. This way the skipper could see where we were and be ready to pick us up when we surfaced. That didn't happen. A little over half a mile behind us lay our boat, still moored at the buoy. Miguel whistled loudly a few times to no avail. I then blew on a diver recovery whistle attached to my B.C. It was deafeningly shrill and extremely loud. No motion from the boat. Miguel decided we should swim together to another boat that we could see. We did have to swim against a cross current at times, but it would have used considerably less energy to swim to the new boat rather than our own. The new boat was also in the direction of land. Ours was not. During the swim to the boat, Miguel apologized for the Captain of the Nemo, our dive boat. Once reaching the new boat, the captain helped each of us out of the water. Knowing the currents in the area, he felt that we might indeed be making our way to his boat instead of going toward our own so he had tried several times to contact the Captain of Nemo by radio to alert him to our whereabouts. Each time held no response. The tour boat was anchored and had two divers in the water. He could not move his boat safely. He could only watch us make our way slowly toward him. The Captain of the

Nemo was finally aroused by the calls from the radio and he answered. He then came to the tour boat and rafted alongside. We transferred gear and then passengers and off we went back to the dock. The Skipper of Nemo now seemed a bit grumpier. We headed back to the Manta Divers dive shop. Mimi Dykes (the owner of Manta Divers) apologized, saying that it was inexcusable. "It was just poor professionalism and irresponsible of the Captain to do what he had done." Mimi was thankful that no one was injured or lost during the dive. She then returned to me the price of the morning's dives. Again she apologized to me personally, assuring me that the proper actions would be taken and reprimands as warranted. I would still dive with them. I got two good dives; a whole lot of exercise and my money back for the dives. With the money I got back, I got a photo CD and T-shirt, and a good story to tell.

**Manta Divers, Best Western Caribe Plaza, February 2006, James Reilly (james.reilly4@worldnet.att.net), Baltimore, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 77F, choppy, no currents. We didn't expect much as the reef begins just to the south of Cancun and we were not disappointed. Modest corals and a few sponges on rock outcrops intermixed with sandy areas. Modest boat, back rolls to get off and a side ladder to climb back aboard. No shade. Divemaster was busy photographing the divers using both a movie and a still camera. No attempt to point stuff out, just film, film, film. Worst, some new divers naturally ran low on air first, but close to the 40 minute limit announced for the dive. Amazingly, they were instructed to surface by themselves in moderately rough sea conditions in a location frequented by several other dive boats, when the DM

easily could have ended the dive and shepherded them to the surface. Instead he kept shooting and shooting until those with more experience were running low — so the dive lasted just over an hour. In all, not such exciting diving, but if you find yourself there on business as we were, well, any dive is fun. Only sour note is that my partner and I found a perfectly good danford anchor on the bottom and recovered it, giving it to the boat crew. Despite the value of this gift, once ashore the dive crew tried to hit us up for tips!

**Papa Hog's, Villa Blanca, February 2006, Russ Battisto (Russ\_Battisto@Comcast.net), Roseville, MN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 76 to 79 F, choppy, currents. Fun boat captains, great divemasters. Villa Blanca next door is clean, affordable and friendly. Hog Town Restaurant has fantastic food and convenient for dive monsters who want a good breakfast as well as a quick lunch between morning and afternoon dives. Also a good place to watch the sun set during happy hour. Reefs got beat up after Wilma so "old-timer" will see real differences. Lots of sand covering coral (not good) but fish life and variety seems to be better than ever. UW Photo equipment accepted and handled properly. On small boats no water available to put cameras in for trip to dive sites so extra care needed to protect equipment.

**Papa Hog's, February 2006, Lucius "Bud" Foster (elijahsdad@prodigy.net), Duluth, MN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 77 to 78 F, calm, currents. The inner reefs were damaged beyond repair, the color is gone, the reefs are buried in sand, the fish have vanished (except the splendid toadfish), and the only good dives

were the deep dives to the south like Santa Rosa, Devil's Throat, Columbia Deeps, and Palancar Caves. All the reef dives were trashed except The Felipe Xicotencatz wreck dive that was still in good shape but that was not supposed to be dived yet until the OK was given. The streets were gone and all the sand on the west coast of Cozumel was gone. The piers and cruise ships were gone, and when we came, we were one of the first tourist planes to land since the hurricane. Papa Hog's, a great dive operation, run six pack boats and have a large boat that is for accommodating large groups. Their shop on the water was wiped out and they were rebuilding the shop on the water front. They have about five rooms available for rent that are reasonable — not fancy, but clean and inexpensive. The food is excellent original Mexican. There is really no need to rent a car if staying at Hog's Hotel because you can take a cab to town for \$4.00 or take a nice 30 min. walk to town. UW Photography Comments: The boat captains hand you your camera in the water and take good care of your equipment. They normally have a rinse tank on the big boat they use for groups and on the small six packs boats, nothing. In shore at facility they have a big fresh water rinse tank across the street and plenty of space for stuff to dry.

**Papa Hog's, March 2006, Rob Vettoreto, Guelph, Ont.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, currents. Mike, Margaret and the dive staff treated us to some outstanding dives and were always looking out for our safety (something I feel is important with any dive opp.). Hog town café has the best poblano pasta that I have ever had and a great patio for happy hour.

**Papa Hog's, Residencias Reef, September 2006, Bob Sugarman, Arlington, VA. (sugarman@abanet.org)** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm, surge. Papa Hog's is a first class operation. Each morning, a small six-pack, with a captain and divemaster, would pick us up at the dock about a quarter mile from our condo. For 5 of the 6 days, only the 4 of us were on the boat. Our nitrox tanks, BCs, and regs were all set up, having been rinsed and stored from the day before. We asked that Sergio be our divemaster all week and the request was honored. Sergio asked where we wanted to dive each day and if we didn't have a preference, he suggested a nice variety of sites. Not much in the way of briefings but he led us on each drift, looking out for us and showing us things of interest. We could dive our own profiles or follow him and the captain was quick to spot us and pick us up, asking us to doff our BCs in the water and hoisting them up before we climbed the ladder. Surface intervals were on the beach and lasted about an hour. The reefs below 30 feet are still covered with sand from 2005 Hurricane Wilma but the color and fish life at shallow depths were plentiful. Saw several turtles, lots of cudas, a few nurse sharks, plentiful rays, and a few sightings, thanks to Sergio, of the endemic splendid toadfish. Residencias Reef is a fairly isolated but luxurious condo 10 minute drive from town — definitely need to rent a car. The condos are large, equipped with everything (ours #5240 even had golf clubs, beach rafts, and bottled water) with great beach views, but ask for one with English rather than Spanish satellite TV. Also inquire about any construction or power outages planned, as we had one day without power and hadn't been advised in advance (although our rent for that day

was refunded.) The beach and grounds are groomed each day and the pool large. Each evening we drove into town and ate tasty grilled fresh seafood at restaurants recommended by divemaster Sergio. It wasn't crowded although the town fills up when the mega cruise ships dock, but they were gone by dinner time. A nice week of pleasant but unexciting diving (except one day when Sergio took us for an exhilarating drift in a strong current that was as exciting as a theme park roller coaster — we were all smiles).

**Pascual's Scuba, El Cantil Sur Condos, February 2006, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com), Golden Valley, MN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, choppy, currents. During Wilma his boat was flipped upside down and sunk. Both of his engines were submerged. He lost all his gauges, most of his weights, and his Bimini top. When we arrived the boat was functional. It had been painted, and the fiberglass was new. The 200 hp engine ran well. The 150 hp engine did have some problems with stalling, due to a bad carburetor, but this typically was temporary, and did not slow down the dives. He still does not have gauges on his boat, and has a temporary top. Most of our dives were with Pascual, and he did his usual excellent job leading the dives. He did hire a guide, Pedro, to lead several dives. Pedro was noticeably less skilled than Pascual, and apparently may be leaving Pascual's operation, due to a lack of work. Pascual and Kristi asked us to take a taxi cab each day to the Caleta Marina, instead of meeting us with the boat at our condominium. This was annoying, but understandable, given his fragile financial condition at that time. He indicated it would save him money on gasoline. One day the boat was

quite crowded, with 10 divers. It was difficult for me to fault him in booking so many divers, as he had had little to no business since the hurricane, and obviously was struggling financially. He managed to guide all of the divers and lead an interesting dive, even for the more experienced participants. There was much sand over all of the shallow reefs in Cozumel. It was suggested that the larger sea life had returned in a greater abundance. That was not my observation, although we did see 4 to 5 large rays, and 4 turtles. The small sea life seemed, to me, to be less abundant. Sand has been washed away from the bottom two or three-foot depth of the base of many reefs. This reef area has no growth. The Devils throat, at Columbia, is no longer a narrow passage, but apparently is a wider cavern. Overall, I would say the diving is somewhat worse than it had been previously, but still much better than many other areas in the Caribbean. The visibility was, still, typically excellent, although on several days we had strange currents, and this led to an underwater "sandstorm." It was interesting to watch little "dust devils" of sand make their way across the bottom. Hotels have taken one of two paths to rebuilding. Some apparently are waiting for insurance checks, and remain broken down concrete shells. Others have completely rebuilt, and are either complete, or close to completion. The Barracuda Hotel apparently slipped into the ocean in part, and collapsed for the most part. It is completely rebuilt now, and looks better than it ever has. Thatch is being replaced all over the island on the roofs of businesses and homes. The infamous "family photograph albums" survived at Coconuts. Most of the downtown area looks better than it did previously, and seems cleaner and freshly painted.

Some businesses, unfortunately, have abandoned Cozumel. El Cantil Sur condominiums look brand new. It was expensive, but comfortable, and convenient. They have rebuilt their dive pier, and dive boats, with the exception of Pascual's boat, arrived every morning in a steady stream.

**Pepe's Scuba, Yucatek Divers, Coral Princess Hotel, May 2006, Tom Lopatin (tomlopatin@optonline.net), Lake Hopatcong, NJ.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, currents. Have been going to Cozumel every year since 1999. Wall dives didn't show much impact, although the Cathedral in Devil's Throat said to be swept away. The second tank drift dives along the top of the walls looked like an underwater snow storm had dropped a couple of inches of "snow" (sand) on them. 90% of the corals and sponges, were gone or totally covered with sand. If you're willing to accept a desolate second dive for a still nice initial wall dive go for it. I took a day to go over to Playa del Carmen to dive the cenotes with Yucatek Divers. Second time I dove the cenotes with them (first time in 2004). Safe and accommodating operation. Cenotes are like "diving in air" with virtually unlimited vis and dramatic cave geography. Easy to do as a day trip with the ferry. Coral Princess Hotel a first class operation from "soup to nuts." Pepe's Abdiaz is the "best of the best" guide.

**ProDive, Sunscape Puerto Aventuras, September 2006, Dr. Michael Pangelinan (surfpange@yahoo.com), Los Angeles, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Got to snorkel with whale sharks! Stein with ProDive at Puerto Aventuras is an excellent and well-informed guide. Visit the Riviera Maya or Cozumel

between mid-June to mid-August and they guarantee whale shark encounters at Isla Holbox. Grueling trip to the feeding grounds but worth it! Dove the cenotes and Puerto Aventuras and Playa del Carmen reefs this trip. Tons of turtles and barracudas at the sites appropriately named Tortugas and Barracudas. Got to see a school of huge trevally patrolling the reef. Morays, lobsters, crabs, rays ... no sharks though. ProDive is a well-run operation. On some dives it was just me and the DM (Nauell –sorry to botch up his name but also excellent DM) so we dove my profile ... nearly 60 minutes on some dive. ProDive does not have a mixer or air at the resort so Nitrox was \$15 extra per tank! The cenotes dives were cool and well led. ProDive provided primary lights for every diver and our guide, Mariana, was excellent. ProDive is an excellent resort for beginners. Good if limited for intermediate divers. (Aquanauts in Puerto Aventuras is the appropriate choice for more advanced divers). All of the DMs and the entire support staff at ProDive were good. Had an alarming 25 minute surface interval when we had to abort a dive due to one diver's malfunctioning reg. The boat went to drop off a group doing their open water check out dives. We drifted south at a pretty good clip on the surface before the boat came back for us. The guys must have been playing cards or fishing but the DM was furious and rightly so. A dive accident would have required immediate transport and a lot of bad things could have happened on the surface in 25 minutes. The incident was reported to management and the 4 of us were issued credits for the missed dive. The DM also helped clear the reg of sand in the shop but offered a rental reg to the diver at no charge. Excellent operation except for that one mishap.

Not truly geared for UWPs. The boat crews did hand down the cameras.

**Scuba Club Cozumel, October 2005, Sue Sepelak (sepelak@rcn.com), Columbia, MD.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F, currents. Only got 3 days of diving in before Hurricane Wilma hit the Island. Although the resort sustained damage to some of the ocean front rooms, the boat pier and beach area, it weathered the storm better than the 5 star hotels up the street. The staff made sure everyone was safe during the storm and did a fantastic job getting the resort up and running again after the storm. Although we couldn't get off the island for several days after the storm due to the damage at the airport and power outages across the entire island, the resort ran their generator for several hours each day to make sure we continued to have showers and hot meals. Since diving was out of the question, the guests occupied their time snorkeling, helping the resort staff clean up, and wandering through San Miguel examining the damage. By the time we flew out 5 days after the storm, the island was well on its way cleaning up and getting back to normal.

**Scuba Club, December 2005, D. Demming (ddemming@demmingfinancial.com), Hudson, OH.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 150 to 200 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. The hotel lost its first floor restaurant and bar, outside lockers, and 6 or 7 rooms plus most of the outside patio areas. One of the few shore-based facilities that caters appropriately to divers.

**Scuba Cozumel, Scuba Club Cozumel, February 2006, Bill Allen (wcapeg@hotmail.com), Melbourne Beach, FL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives.

Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, calm, surge. The shallow reefs of Cozumel, i.e., Tormentos and Paradise, are now effectively buried under sand. In some places under feet of sand. Santa Rosa and Punta Sur (deeper reefs) have a good dusting of sand. Noticeable by their absence are the abundant large green eels of the past and the large grouper. This trip I saw only one green moray and maybe a half dozen medium sized grouper. There is significant damage to the vegetation on the island but it is already making a comeback. The underwater scene will take longer but recovery is already taking place. When the current is running you can watch the sand being blown off the reef structure. Cozumel is changed, and it's not all bad. It is all new.

**Scuba Club Cozumel, February 2006, Juli Tracy and Dick Gamble, CA.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 79 F, surge, currents. Time was pretty much up to the divers as was depth. No one checked or cared much about what divers did. The Hurricanes in 2005 seem to have drastically altered the diving. Either that, or there was way too much hype about Cozumel before the hurricanes! Dive sites were bland, lots of sand covering corals, few fish, and the currents so strong that you couldn't photograph the few there were. Did see some eels (a few, lots of angels and schools of grunts, but there was little color anywhere. Besides that, there was a cold wind blowing, and the boat was basically unprotected, so we froze. On the first dive, one of us had to surface for more weight and couldn't get the attention of the boat, although he had just entered the water. Then another of us had trouble clearing and lost sight of the group of divers and the wall by the time she descended, so ascended after a safety stop and couldn't

get the attention of the boat. She could see the boat, far off, but waving a pink fin did no good, so she inflated a safety sausage. In 15 minutes, a boat from another dive operation came to get her, and radioed her boat. A third diver also lost the dive master and his group (which by now consisted of two people — guess he never noticed the missing three divers) in the murk and came to the surface at the end of the dive with another diver, who was also separated. They had to wait about 10 minutes for a pickup. Several times during the week divers had to wait, seemingly unnoticed, and the divemaster didn't keep much track of their divers. The divemasters didn't watch for their divers and the people on the boat didn't notice much of anything. It felt unsafe to be diving with these people. Scuba Club Cozumel itself was quite nice — rooms were well appointed and the food was decent. The loss of their docks and shore storage lockers due to the hurricane is a minor nuisance, necessitating dragging all the gear to the boats each morning from the dive shop. Two mornings we were there the boats weren't able to come up to the temporary docking spot, so divers were bused into town to the town pier to board. (We didn't go those days, which turned out to be fortuitous, since most those onboard became seasick, including crew members.). We had booked two weeks and cancelled the second week, returning home in spite of change fees. The diving was poor, the dive operation felt unsafe, the weather was terrible, we were miserable onboard because of the cold, and generally, our vacation was terrible! (Note: the people were the high point of the trip —friendly and trying to do as much as possible to make things better.) We took a digital photo course while we were there, given

by Bonnie Pelnar. We both learned a tremendous amount.

**Scuba Club Cozumel, May 2006, John Crellin (john15237@yahoo.com), Wexford, PA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. The hotel facilities are designed for divers. Nothing fancy, but hanging racks for gear. The facility was fully functional and in great shape. The food was excellent and service was great. I brought my laptop and DVDs. There are no TVs in the rooms, just an alarm clock/radio. The instructor was outstanding. I completed 2 specialties. The boats were in excellent condition and although the big boat I was on had about 18 divers, we entered the water in 3 groups and did not overlap with the other groups. I was able to get in an afternoon boat dive every day. Shore diving is not worth the effort. It was good to check out my equipment, but the bottom around the hotel area is barren. Boats had plenty of fresh water barrels but none labeled for cameras only. They have wireless high speed internet for free for digital photographers that want to send out pictures.

**Scuba Club, August 2006, Jeanne and Bill Downey (downdive@comcast.net), Baden, PA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. The shore dive is different—the sea grass is buried under the sand and the formations sunk as fish habitats are mostly gone, but the old dock, now underwater, has become home for octopus and fish. We saw tiny crabs and shrimp everywhere at night, plus a couple unusual things, like what I can only describe as a small “hairy” octopus, something you’d expect to see in Indonesia. We also had an eagle ray swim by in shallow water. The wall diving is still good, in fact we saw more big

groupers this time than in the past couple of years, the turtles are still around and we had several extended eagle ray encounters. Some tunnels have closed up while others have opened. Shallow spots suffered more damage. But even on these reefs there were plenty of fish and eels, although not so many critters as their hiding places are gone. The splendid toad fish are still around, peering out of their holes. The wreck of the Felipe Xicontencati looks like Wilma tried to twist it in half; now it has more character. Fortunately it’s still upright and is a great beginner wreck dive. Yes, things look different, but it’s still a great place to have a good time! UW Photography Comments: Nice camera table on larger boats; in rough seas had to brace cameras so they didn’t fall off. Need larger rinse tanks/buckets.

**Scuba Club Cozumel, September 2006, Bob and Betty Barada (bbarada@pacbell.net), Walnut Creek, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 85 to 90 F, calm, currents. We were also at Scuba Club in March. This trip we saw some improvement in the reefs, and more fish, loads of turtles, many nurse sharks, 3 small black tips sharks, large groupers, and lots of small fish. The hardest hit by Wilma were sea urchins (only saw two small ones this trip, none in March), and no seahorses. On one trip to Punta Sur we encountered strong currents, some downdrafts, and a whirlpool at the surface. On other dives, we had no current, including a spectacular night dive where you could look up and see the boat and deck workers from 60 feet. Scuba Club is at its best. We took advantage of a special to go in September. Quiet, with only about 20% of the rooms filled. Service impeccable and the staff feel like family. Only two boats needed to take the divers, and we

were on boats with as few as 5 divers, as many as 15, but Scuba Club has huge, roomy boats.

**Scuba Cozumel, Scuba Club Cozumel, September 2006, Craig M Smith, Aransas Pass, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Excellent hotel and dive operation. The rooms are simple — no TV or phones — but clean, modern, quiet, and roomy. Most have a great ocean view. The staff is eager to please. SCC is all-inclusive, and the food service is excellent, and they even held our evening meal for us when we came back late after a spectacular night dive. The grounds are immaculate, and secured by a 24-hour guard. Shore diving is fair, marred by a relatively featureless rubble ground, punctuated by man-made objects placed to attract reef fish. Cozumel's famous current is present most of the time. The dive boats are well shaded, roomy, O2 equipped and punctual. SCC offers excellent twilight and night dives, and a dive to the local wreck, on a demand basis. Nitrox is available. The divemasters are good at grouping divers of similar skill, and within the limits of drift diving, one can dive one's own profile.

**Studio Blue, March 2006, Jesse H Scott (jesse\_h\_scott@hotmail.com), Atlantic Beach, NC.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. Shallow reefs are in terrible shape. Most soft coral gone and consequent lack of much marine life. Layer of sand smothering reef. Deeper reefs down south are OK. Go somewhere else and give it some time to grow back. International pier is gone! Land based facilities in great shape, rebuilt quickly. Lots of boat people (cruise ships), up to 5 at a time. Get a jeep and cruise around. Get away from the shore front

and explore for good places to eat. I hate resorts. Colonial in downtown San Miguel is cheap and basic. Studio Blue is a fine shop and Manuel Ortiz treated us well. Somewhat more expensive than others but more flexible in arrangements. Marine park closed one whole day due to choppier water. I rented tanks (from the local air fill facility for less than a \$1 per tank!). Dove the other side of Coz. Long surface swims and you never know what you'll get. The dirt road to the north side on the other side of the island is closed! Really good shores dives up there.

**United Divers, June 2006, Terri and Norman Rabinowicz, Boulder, CO. (terri@propertycolorado.com)** United Divers owner Manuel was great and gave service beyond what we expected. He planned the dives well, served wonderful lunches, took care of our gear, and even presented us at the end with photos and a CD of photos of our dives. He and his crew are the best!

**Yucatech Expeditions, November 2005, Alexander Griffin, Gaithersburg, MD.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Feet. Water: 75 to 81 F, no currents. I signed on with German Yanez of Yucatech Expeditions to look at caves both in the Yucatan and on Cozumel — surprisingly, they were all in good shape, at least what I saw. German's shop (I mean the old one, he has since moved) was difficult to find, being a few blocks behind the center of San Rafael. But once inside and talking with German himself, you know you are dealing with a top-notch operation. He personally offers several certifications through CMAS, NSS-CDS and NACD. Arranging our cave dives was a thorough exercise in both dive planning and in gear safety. The cave I most wanted to visit was Sac Aktun ("the

White Cave”) at Grand Cenote, after seeing so many incredible photographs of it. German made all of the transport, lunch and admission arrangements, including having our double tanks waiting for us in Playa del Carmen. The only thing I had to arrange was my ferry passage from Cozumel to Playa. Sac Aktun us one of the most decorative caves I’ve ever seen on land or underwater. A few days later German took me to two caves on Cozumel. The first was Chankanaab, the same cave system that has an entrance from the sea that you find listed in many dive books. German parks his truck on the side of a highway . . . middle of nowhere really . . . and we trek through the scrub (fully loaded down with dive gear) for about 200 meters on a path he blazed a few weeks previous. The waterhole looks like an oversized birdbath and is filled with leaf fronds and sticks, leftovers of Wilma’s rage. Donning our fins we slipped into the water (bleah!) and then down through a deceptively large cave mouth! The fresh water table had been pushed down by Wilma’s rains and the haloclines were lower than normal. There was a lot of silt and plant matter suspended in the water in the downstream section of the cave, as the flow slowly washed storm debris out to sea. The upstream section was much clearer, with amazing halocline effects that made me feel like I was diving in air, with the salt water like a river beneath me. Chankanaab made for an easy dive as the profile was pretty flat at an average 28 feet. German would occasionally shake off the guidelines which had become covered in storm silt. The best dive was the last, in Aerolito. German guided me two jumps off the main line, way into the back loop of the cave. The freshwater layer of the halocline at 30 feet stirred readily, making visibil-

ity poor. But once in the salt water at depths of 50-80 feet the visibility was absolutely incredible. German pointed out some native creatures of the cave including an albino starfish. Aerolito is not decorated nearly as much as her Riviera Maya cousins, but it is still fascinating.

**Yucatech Expeditions, July 2006, Patrick Wikstrom (mrpat@brmemc.net), Warne, NC.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 2 to 200 Feet. Water: 74 F. While Cozumel’s reefs took a heavy hit during last year’s hurricane there’s one group of dive sites that remained untouched: the limestone solution caves. Yucatech Expeditions just a couple of blocks off the main square is one of the handful of dive ops that conducts full cave diving. German Yanez answers the e-mail, mans the shop, drives the transport, and guides the dives. It’s a fun filled day diving with one of the principal explorers of the island caves. All arrangements were conducted efficiently via the internet. German had my preferred day available, reasonable rates for his rental equipment and dive guide services, and told me to pay him when I got there. I rented a primary light and long hose regulator, everything else I brought. After the paperwork we rigged our gear on the back of an old pick up and headed to the first site. Aerolito, currently surveyed to just over 20,000 ft. in length is the 15th longest cave in the Yucatan. Unlike many commercial cenotes along the Riviera Maya Aerolito has no picnic tables, platforms, stairs, or other dive site enhancements. We drove in on a rutted dirt road right to the edge of the cenote where lake fish could be seen nibbling on algae. Entrance was via a giant stride off the limestone ledge into the 74 degree water. In the shallowest sections small holes pockmarked the ceilings show-

ing evidence of percolation of rain water into the system. A well-defined halocline layer separated the fresh water on top and the salt water lying below. During one long run of cave directly at the halocline we moved through a visually confusing emulsion like an oil and vinegar salad dressing. Generally in the fresh water sections there was more tannin staining of the walls and spelotherms. The flowstones and other limestone features were smoother and more graceful here. In the deeper saltwater passages many decorations and cave structures appeared to be dissolving leaving sharp angles and jagged edges throughout the cave. The floor of the cave is covered in a layer of fine grey/brown silt. We encountered albino sea stars, white sponges, and blind cave fish. A small centipede-like creature, called Remapede, crawled along a silty ledge. I looked down and was stunned to see a white shell-less tube worm with small squid like tentacles (Ofioros worm). I gently touched the worm, which immediately grabbed my finger with a surprisingly strong grip for a 3 1/2 inch creature. Startled I jerked back and the worm let go, popped off the silt, and began vigorously twisting and flopping away in the water column like a Spanish Dancer eventually settling down a couple of feet away. Negotiating some minor restrictions the cave opens into a beautiful room filled with marvelous decorations and ornamentation. Dribbling flowstones form the walls, sculpted columns of white and brown limestone appear to hold up the roof, and delicate soda straws, stalactites and stalagmites adorn the chamber. Hitting my "thirds" on the double 80s, I make the sign to turn the dive and we begin to slowly retrace our path. Along the way I notice more beautiful formations. Pausing to undo our tie-ins and retrieve

our reels I'm spellbound by the majesty of this system. Eventually I notice a faint green glow and we stop for some minor decompression before we leave the cave and re-enter the open bowl of the cenote. German later tells me we'd penetrated between 1700 and 1800 ft. My computer says I reached a depth of 60ft, ran an average depth of 37 ft, and spent a total of 92min. After a break in town for lunch we reconvene, load up a fresh set of doubles and roll down the road toward Chankanaab. We gear up along the shoulder of the highway and follow an almost imperceptible game trail to the cenote. Loaded down in our gear and carrying our fins we hobble through the woods crossing barbed wire fences and pushing through thickets. Eventually we reach a murky brown pond surrounded by jungle. Carefully wading over the algae-covered rocks I find myself bobbing next to a small branch sticking out of the water. Tied to the branch is a thin white line. German admonishes me to be careful since if I bust this stick we'll lose our lifeline. The descent is one at a time through the muddy, zero visibility, brown water. Feet first we slither our way down an almost vertical series of cracks and crevices eventually popping out around 25 ft in the clear flow of the aquifer. This cave, Cueva Quebrada, has a more eerie feel. The walls seem darker and the silk looked thicker. We slip through several restrictions in a narrow passage and I momentarily get stuck and have to push back to try a different approach. But just like in Aerolito we break out into large rooms with interesting structures and beautiful decorations. All in all it was a fun filled day diving with one of the principal explorers of the island caves. German Yanez Mendoza is a personable entrepreneur who also offers guided cenote tours on the main-

land for open water divers.

## Isla de Mujeres

**Aqua Adventures, Avalon Reef Club, February 2006, Ron and Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.** Experience: 450 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. Nice resort; many problems due to hurricane. Only open three weeks before we arrived. Brochures say gratuity included, but no tip, no service. Tip baskets everywhere. Perhaps because of lack of work due to hurricane. Diving only two days due to strong winds (35-40 mph). Dock at resort was destroyed – had to walk to town dive shop; dive shop on premises was also destroyed.

## Yucatan Peninsula

**Bahia Divers, Gran Bahia Principe Tulum, December 2005, Joe Simmons (joebuck1@mac.com), Farmington, NM.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis:

60 to 125 Feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, calm. Bahia Divers is 13 miles north of the resort at Xpu-Ha Beach. I easily arranged both reef and cenote dives by email with owner/operators Stefano Pedroni and Clare, Italian and British ex-pats. Bahia Divers provided consistently on-time transportation to and from our hotel in the operation's van. Dive guides Stefano and Mauricio were attentive to the needs of both our less experienced and experienced divers providing thorough pre-dive briefings and pointing out interesting marine life. Drift dives were the norm with the 20-foot, center-console, covered dive boats following our bubbles; diver entries and exits were safely and effectively accomplished. Generally minor damage from Hurricane Wilma was apparent with broken coral scars and some bleaching at depths in the 60- to 85-foot range. Some areas of the reefs were lush and prolific; shallower reefs were strewn with algal overgrowths. Hawksbills were abundant and I saw more free-

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swimming large green morays than is common elsewhere. We planned one morning of cenote dives (two dives) at Dos Ojos for five divers with two guides; at the last minute the rest of the family decided to snorkel the cenotes and Bahia Divers to set up a snorkel for ten with a dedicated guide and provide gear and transportation for all of us. The cenote dives and the snorkeling expedition were fantastic! Bahia Divers personalized, attentive, and cordial service was exceptional. UW Photography Comments: Boat operator and dive guide attentive to photographer's needs, but no rinsing facilities.

**Bucanero del Caribe, Kabahna, December 2005, Eruk Williamson (erukwild@acsalaska.net), Anchorage, AK.** Experience: 51-100 dives.

Vis: 120 to 140 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, calm. Banco Chinchorro is an hour and half boat ride from Mahahual. Windy conditions are common, so many days the trip is not possible. The coral is the best we have seen: lots of purple fans, black coral, brain, staghorn, huge sponges, etc. Reef fish are diverse but not plentiful. As far as big stuff we saw a few jacks, snapper, grouper, stingray. Arturo Garcia Barbosa is divemaster for Bucanero del Caribe. They have 1 of only 2 permits for Chinchorro. Arturo is fine as a divemaster. Perhaps not so good for beginner divers. They also take snorkelers in separate boat to Chinchorro. We had lunch at Cayo Central which has fishing villages and biological station. Price is \$150 US for two dives. The equipment is in good condition, although the air tasted funky, but no one got a headache or anything. Kabahna where we stayed is 8 km from Mahahual. It is a good value, good location, good people, and good food.

**Dive Aventuras, Aventura Spa, Decem-**

**ber 2005, Beth Landis (bethelandi@aol.com), Eagle, ID.** Experience: 100+ dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm and flat, no currents. Aventura Spa is a huge resort that can host about 2400 people. They have multiple restaurants evening entertainment, several pools, a labyrinth, and all the amenities that a resort can offer. The huge Jacuzzi tub in every room is perfect for dive gear. Great food and excellent service. Dive Aventuras is a great group. The dive sites were literally a few minutes from shore so surface intervals were back on land. Gear storage at the shop. Interested in fish ID. They cooperate with REEF. The cenote dive was well run, but I discovered I don't want to be a cave diver. They offer complimentary transportation to many hotels in the area.

**Dreamtime Dive Resort, December 2005, Hugh Aaron (heaaron@hrai.com), Mechanicsville, VA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy, no currents. My wife, 12-year-old son and I were on the Carnival Valor the week between Christmas and New Years, 2005. My wife and I have been diving for about 25 years. My son was certified this past summer. Costa Maya was my son's third saltwater dive. We had made arrangement (via email) before we left home to do a two-tank boat dive in Costa Maya with Dreamtime Dive Resort. Dreamtime is on the beach about one-half of a mile beyond the tourist area in Mahahual. It was about a 10 minute cab ride from the cruise ship pier (about \$5 per person). Make sure that you ask the cab driver to drop you off at the Dreamtime dive shop. Otherwise, you will have a bit of a hike from town. Upon arrival, we were asked to complete a thorough questionnaire and show our C cards. It immediately

became obvious to us that Dreamtime is a professional and safety conscious operation. Carlos, the Dreamtime dive boat captain, backed the boat up to the beach and the Dreamtime staff loaded our gear for us. We then boarded the boat right from the beach. The boat was in excellent shape and well set-up for diving with heavy duty integrated tank racks on the port and starboard sides. Willie, one of the Dreamtime dive masters, led both dives. Willie is extremely customer service oriented. It was obviously important to him that we had a great experience in Costa Maya and we did. The first dive was to about 70 feet. Although the chop cut down the visibility somewhat, the reef was still beautiful and teeming with sea life. After a surface interval of a little over an hour, we made our second dive at a shallower area of the reef. My son had some trouble clearing on the second dive and Willie worked with him patiently while the rest of us enjoyed the dive. In addition to our family and Willie, there were three other divers on the first dive and two other divers on the second dive.

**Dreamtime Dive Resort, Carnival Cruise, Liberty, February 2006, Jill and Rob Caple (rg250cat@msn.com), Pasadena, MD.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy. I booked with Dreamtime divers on-line. Dive shop was nice and friendly people. This part of Mexico is getting more visitors because of the new cruise port in Majahual. We had a taxi take us to dive shop. We only had one other couple with us on our first dive; my husband and I thought that wherever the other couple had gotten their certification from should have their license taken away from them. They should have never been diving (the woman came out with her

wetsuit on backwards and the husband could not control his buoyancy the whole dive and at one point shot up to the surface from 60 feet). The coral was in outstanding shape and fish life was large and colorful. The people renting Waverunner jet skis should give briefing on avoiding divers and dive boats. On our second dive, when we surfaced there were people on jet skis blasting around us and it was pretty scary thinking about getting run over by one. We would have liked to have seen a dive flag posted on our boat. Great dive shop and great diving.

**GoCenotes, March 2006, Rich Orman (richorman@comcast.net), Aurora, CO.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 77 F, no currents. I made my arrangements with Studio Blue on Cozumel, who referred me to GoCenotes in Playa Del Carmen. Cost was about \$100US. This was a two-tank dive with aluminum 80s. There are numerous cenotes down the coast south of Playa Del Carmen (there are quite a few cenotes on Cozumel, but they are not suitable for anything but certified cave divers, so if you want to go cenote diving from Cozumel, you have to take a ferry and go to Playa). We went to Cenote Vos Ojos, a little west of Akumal. The cenotes were once ordinary caves, and filled with water thousands of years ago. The visibility was the best that I have ever seen in any type of water. Apart from a few small fish, there is no underwater life in the cenotes, just beautiful cave formations and the eerie feeling you get from diving in a cave. The parameters of cavern diving require that there be no more than four divers and one dive master on each dive. The divers follow the dive master in single file, and you have to keep in a horizontal position with your legs bent upwards at the knees to avoid kicking

up sediment. The best way to kick is a modified frog kick. We went no deeper than 40 feet, and we were usually at around 20 feet. These dives are not for people with buoyancy control problems or with fear of confined spaces or the dark. There are times that you are in an overhead environment, but you are never far from an alternate air source (i.e., your small group) and never more than a 90 second or so swim to some kind of surface where you can breathe without a regulator.

**Go Cenotes, Mimi del Mar, June 2006, David N Scarborough, Douglasville, GA. (david@wan2dive.com),** Experience: 251-500 dives. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. Mini del Mar hotel is great and within walking distance of 5th Ave (Shopping) in Playa del Carmen. The group loved it. This trip was to take 21 people to swim with the whale sharks in Holbox. The dive operation was wonderful; they helped us in every way possible, even set up a surprise birthday party. While shooting HD video, use correct filters for the super green water; vis in Holbox is 10-20 feet. In Play del Carmen area, the reefs good shape for drift dives. Snacks on boat, staff helpful, watchful. Captain and crew friendly. Be ready this time of year for strong current.

**Hotel Akumal Caribe, November 2005, Walter Brenner, Wayne, PA. (walt-brenner@hotmail.com)** Experience: over 1000 dives. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm and flat, no currents. The eastern part of the Yucatan peninsula is a limestone plain. Underground springs and rivers have carved out the calcareous substrate into a vast system of channels, caverns, tunnels, caves, and vaulted chambers. In many places the surface layers have collapsed, leaving visible holes into some of this underground

water world. The holes range in size from mere cracks to several acres. These wells are called "Cenotes" by the indigenous Maya Indians. When divers enter a cenote, the first space is the "cavern" and, as long as sunlight is visible to the divers (coming from the entrance or other surface openings), it is considered "cavern diving." No special certification is required, although a diver should not be inclined to claustrophobia, must have excellent buoyancy skills, and should be a shallow breather. To move out of the cavern area (and the limits are clearly marked), one must be a certified "cave diver." Water depth can vary from a few feet to 60 feet and typically, a dive takes about one hour. The Hotel Akumal Caribe is about 100 miles south of the Cancun airport by an excellent highway. It is in better shape than when I first visited in 1977. Accommodations consist of roomy, comfortable, and clean cabins or a more conventional three-story hotel – all on the beach, as is a marvelous restaurant plus an open air snack bar. The service, friendliness, overall ambience, and administrative efficiency made this a perfect choice. The Hotel Akumal Caribe is in the middle of the area where the most accessible cenotes are. Most are on private property and deep in the jungle. The hotel dive shop provides excellent cenote and cave diving trips with top-notch divemasters. Ours, Jose Orozeo, a certified cave diver, has been doing this for 25 years and was one of the first to explore and map the Yucatan cenotes. His expertise, patience, and care made this a super experience. The Mexican dive community has built this diving speciality into an integrated, safe, and tightly controlled industry. The water in the cenotes is crystal clear, although there are frequent "salt lines" when one passes through a salt water/fresh water

interface. For a few feet of depth, the water appears “oily.” Besides the initial cavern, one continually swims through narrow channels into other rooms. Often these are slightly sunlit, which gives a most awesome and eerie aspect to the scene. Many contain stalactites and stalagmites from eons past when water levels were much lower – during ice ages, for example. Often the two formations met, creating columns of intricate design and color. Fish life is almost nonexistent, although there are usually a few small ones.

**Maya Palms Resort, May 2006, Cres Van Keulen (cres@vkam.com), Tiburón, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, choppy. Two friends and I went for one week to the area of Mahahual, about 5 hours south of Cancun and maybe 1-2 hours north of the Guatemalan border. Due to overfishing, the government is encouraging fishermen to become dive boat captains and guides. We rented a car in Cancun and drove to Playa del Carmen to spend the night rather than brave nighttime driving on a strange road. This was a good decision. Off-airport car rentals are less expensive than on-airport agencies — and, they come pick you up at the airport for the short ride to the rental car office. We used Econo Car Rental. Four-door small wagon was \$329 with unlimited mileage and insurance that is mandatory in Mexico. Watch out — many places quote without insurance and act like it is optional, which it is not. After a pleasant night in Playa del Carmen and a too-leisurely breakfast, we headed down south and stopped at Hidden Worlds Cenotes Park which is before Tulum. Dives are scheduled for 9:00, 11:00 and 1:00 PM. We took the 11:00, which, followed by lunch, made for a long drive to Mahahual and

8:00 PM arrival. The Cenote dive was fascinating. Our competent guide had never been in the ocean and had no desire to do so! (I think he was afraid of sharks.) The owners of Maya Palms Resort, Doug and Cathy Goergens, also own Bonne Terre Mine in Missouri and a couple of dive shops. Cathy is at Maya Palms full-time, Doug is there part-time. They purchased the Maya Palms a couple of years ago and have invested heavily in renovation. While we were there, it was still in “soft opening” because they were putting in a new dining room, renovating all the casitas, etc. Outside a couple of cruise ship divers, we were the only guests all week, so Doug, Cathy, cooks Anna and Jose, and Op manager Ken quickly became family. But don’t worry about the cruisers — Maya Palms is south of town in a private location while the cruise ship dock is north of town. The cruisers come for a couple of hours of diving, then leave. Mahahual, with its sand roads and meandering streets, is underwhelming. We were glad we did not stay at the “Dreamtime Resort” just outside town. The advertised “Mayan style” cabins translates into “primitive” and they are near the main road which runs between the cabins and the beach. Okay, so the road is lightly traveled, but the website definitely suggests a much nicer set-up than reality. The beach in the Mahahual area is narrow and covered in seaweed and trash. These are not the beautiful, wide, clean beaches one expects farther north and the sand fleas can be vicious around sunset. The Maya Palms rooms were great: two rooms to each casita and nicely appointed. They have their own water purification plant. Wireless internet is available. We enjoyed Jose and Anna’s Mexican meals — both attended the same cooking school in Mexico City.

Although we had hoped to dive the Chinchorro Banks, the big boat was out of commission, so get assurances in advance that the boat will be available. Diving was 10-15 minutes offshore on the Meso-American Reef. The first two days there were 3-4 foot waves and quick chop, making it difficult to get out through the reef cut, so we stayed onboard between the two tank dives. One in our group was nervous and had a difficult time getting back onboard because of the waves but the winds settled down after a few days and we were able to rest on the beach between dives. Depths were 50-100 ft. through cuts and canyons with a variety of life — some areas not so good, others teeming with tropicals. During 5 days of diving we saw a couple of turtles, several spotted drums (including juveniles), lobster, morays, spotted eagle rays, conch, and a pair of southern stingrays that were easily 4 ft diameter. Lots of soft corals: brain, sponge, barrel, fan, rope, etc. We were basically on our own — one guy in the water with us, but we knew way more about the fish than he did so he was not really a dive guide, much less a dive master. Most dives were 45-65 minutes, all drift diving. Surface at 500 PSI and signal the boat driver. Dolphins often followed the dive boat. Nice one-week escape at a reasonable price. The pool is great, the bar is open, groups will like it.

**Puerto Holbox, July 2006, Scott (scottj96@aol.com), Murrieta, CA.**  
Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, calm, currents, no currents. After reading Ben Davison's report on Holbox 2004 I had to visit it. What a trip. I have never seen a whale shark ... well, I saw more than an eyeful. About 20 whale sharks the first day; also mantas and dolphins. The second day about the

same number; it is really hard to tell if you are swimming with that many as you do not know if the one you just swam with was the same one or not ... but the waters are filled with them. I jumped into the water with a T-shirt and shorts ... Yikes! That water was somewhere around 76 to 78 degrees ... Jumped back on board for my 2mm shortie! Holbox is a unique and a wonderful little town. Great food and great ice cream (Maresa's homemade)! The Mexican government is putting restrictions on the number of boats, only biodegradable suntan lotion, only two divers and 10 minutes at a time in the water. Stayed at the Puerto Holbox. Victor is the owner and made me feel like it was home, beautiful beach and rooms ... Bring your bug spray! What a great place.

**Tank Ha, Barcelo, July 2006, Betsy Baste (bbaste1@hughes.net), Otto, NC.**  
Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, choppy. We stayed at the Barcelo Resort in Riviera Maya and dived in Playa del Carmen. The Resort was exceptional in design, accommodations, food and especially service. The people, the service and the commitment to personal attention were outstanding. However, Dressel Divers was severely lacking. After numerous attempts to dive with them, we got too frustrated and finally gave up trying. Before leaving for the trip, I contacted the corporate office of Dressel in Spain. They assured me as an SSI instructor, I would have no problem certifying my 20-year-old daughter with Dressel. When I arrived, it was another story altogether. The staff at Dressel said we would have to pay for their certification course. This made no sense as I am an instructor with a million-dollar liability policy. I found Tank Ha dive facility in Playa del Carmen, and they met all our

needs for me to certify my daughter, including the use of their pool for a quick refresher of skills. They took us on a short ride to fish-rich reefs. I never saw so many scorpionfish in a week of diving, and we only dived with Tank Ha for 2 days. We also saw huge turtles and barracuda. Didn't see pelagics, but that was fine with my new-diver daughter. The cenote trip with Kenny was incredible. Groups were limited to 4 people. The halocline and the cave formations have got to be seen. After our dives, my daughter thought her purse was stolen from the cubbies at Tank Ha. The staff helped us look everywhere. Luckily, she had left it in a dining room at the Barcelo resort, and it was returned to the front desk with only the money missing.

## MONTSERRAT

**Seawolf Diving, Vue Pointe Hotel, June 2006, Brant Shenkarow (brantravels@yahoo.com), San Anselmo, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 125 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm, no currents. This is a "new" dive destination. The old dive sites are gone, buried in ash. The north end of the island is the "new" Montserrat — new dive sites are being discovered and named weekly. There are relatively few divers visiting the island . . . most days I was the only visiting diver. The vis and light of the shallow sites are excellent for photography, as are the abundant and healthy corals, sponges, and animal life. The island is interesting topside as well. Recent volcanic activity has placed, as of June 2006, 60% of the area in an "exclusion zone," though it's not difficult to find a born-and-bred Montserratian to be your guide through the devastation. Walking

through the old capitol, Plymouth, is eerie and fascinating . . . bring your camera and a few varied lenses. The island is quiet, not for the party-going Caribbean tourist. The people are pleasant and helpful. There really aren't many good restaurants or hotels, since the island is just getting started again. The Vue Pointe is a 40-year classic, the oldest hotel and restaurant on the island, surviving the volcano's eruption in the mid 90s. Do not miss their Wednesday night BBQ. Fish are shy, not used to seeing divers, so good close-ups are difficult. I used my 12-24 and 17-35 mm lens exclusively after my failed 60 mm first dive. Good visibility and good ambient light. Since most dives are within 60 foot depth, 90 minute dives are not uncommon.

## NICARAGUA

### Little Corn Island

**Dive Little Corn Island, Casa Iguana, December 2005, Terry Anderson, College Station, TX.** Vis: 40-80 feet. Water: 84 F. 400+ dives all over the world. According to the 2004 Chapbook Little Corn is like the Caribbean in the 1950s, and in far as hotels, crowds, casinos, cruise ships, and discos, that it true—and that is wonderful. You fly into Managua and stay overnight. (Granada and Masaya are nice colonial towns if you want to see more of Nicaragua.) Cathy at Casa Iguana will help you set up flights from Managua to Corn Island, get your electronic ticket, and then get you on the 40 minute boat ride to Little Corn. The boat landing is in front of Dive Little Corn and the friendly DMs will help you stow your gear for the next day's dives before they get you on the path to Casa Iguana. The