

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

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

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

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

MEXICO

The sea mounts of the Sea of Cortez have sea lions and occasional schooling hammerheads, though fishing continues to wipe out the big fish. Still, there's good diving from Cabo Pulmo to San Lucas and even farther north operators are getting to the seamounts. In winter and spring water temperatures can drop to the low 60s. Visibility is lower (25-40 feet), but generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer, when the water warms to the 80s in the Sea of Cortez. From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving

difficult. Wear a skin or wetsuit for protection from jellyfish. Socorro Island has hammerheads and mantas, though it's a long ride from Cabo and there's no guarantee of sharks or good weather. Manta sightings are reliable and they have a reputation for letting divers approach. One can find good accommodations and food at all the dive venues north of Cabo. Farther south, Pacific diving is dulled by low visibility.

Acapulco

Swiss Divers Association, March 2006, Michael Braunstein, Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 250+ dives. Vis: 10 to 20 feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm and flat. I went to Acapulco to play tennis on clay. The last day I decided to dive. I was surprised at the professionalism of the Swiss Divers Association and what I saw. There were 3-4 seahorses, a variety of eels and many puffers.

Cabo San Lucas

Professional Diving Services, Condo, September 2005, Jeffrey R. Johnson (jrj60174@sbcglobal.net), St. Charles, IL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. First day of diving, near Lands End off Cabo San Lucas, at end of dive after number of divers had called it quits we were watching a reef shark below us, suddenly a whale shark, maybe 20', came within six feet of us. It was our Divemaster's first sighting. Also saw sea lions in same area. Other dives near Lands End we saw guitarfish, scorpionfish, sting rays, some interesting coral and rock formations. Visibility wasn't great. Also took trip to Cabo Pulmo one day to dive Sea of Cortez — about two hour journey — at the end of a long

bumpy gravel road came to an area on the coast with a restaurant and small diving operation. Saw lots of morays and turtles, big schools of Jack, lots of fish in general. I noticed some fisherman snacking on something, went to investigate and they were cutting slices of freshly caught tuna, dipping in soy and lime sauce — excellent!

Underwater Diversions, April 2006, Carmelita Hansen, San Jose, CA. (mhel0323@sbcglobal.net), Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 25 Feet. Water: 68 to 72 F, calm. The water was chilly and we were comfortable in our dry suits. The visibility was just as murky as in California but we saw lots of marine creatures that are unique to this area. The dive guides were helpful with the gear and in pointing out some critters. However, due to the heavy boat traffic at Land's End, we had to stay with the dive guide and surface together. This "herding the divers together" mentality made it difficult for us to find and photograph the macro creatures we were looking for. All the local dive boats seemed to dive at the same locations simultaneously, resulting in crowded conditions underwater. The dive operators were not willing to go anywhere else that might not have been so crowded. One operator told us they wouldn't go to Cabo Pulmo because "the conditions aren't good this time of year." However, the local dive operator at Cabo Pulmo was booked up and going out twice a day, so we went snorkeling there. The conditions at Cabo Pulmo appeared to be as good as those at Land's End. No camera table or rinse buckets for underwater cameras but we were able to use the wet suit rinse hose for rinsing the cameras and dry suit valves. They handled our cameras carefully though.

Underwater Diversions, June 2006, Bear Johnston (bearjohnston@cusd.com), Madera, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Feet. Water: 60 to 63 F, surge. The dive conditions were not good; there was storm south of us messing up the water. The owner of the operation did everything he could to make things comfortable. I came with enough exposure for 70 degree water, so the owner let me use a 3mm jacket at no charge. He also went out of his way to schedule a trip to Cabo Pulmo. The conditions there were much better. Water temp. was in the 70s and the vis. was 60' to 70'. Fish life was much better.

Underwater Diversions, Marina Sol, August 2006, Elaine Matthews (elaine@venturesetc.com), Redondo Beach, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 77 to 82 F, choppy. This was a family trip. 1 snorkeler, 2 just certified OW divers, 1 OW divers with 3 dives, 1 AOW diver with 50 dives, 1 AOW diver with 100 dives, 1 DM with 500 dives, 1 DM with 2000 dives. We did request 'beginner diving' for the entire group to be together as a family. However, this operation does not allow you to dive your own profile. In all other ways they were accommodating, the Dive Leader went slow for us (although not as slow at our photographers might have liked), and was great at finding and pointing out things. The boats are covered Panga boats, set up for 24 divers. We had 1 day with 16 divers and things were tight. We took 1 night dive with them. The hotel (not connected to Underwater Diversions) is an older condominium. We rented it because it was 5 bedrooms (we were 4 couples). It's getting a bit long in the tooth, but it was clean. Our A/C didn't quite get cool in the bedrooms, but it wasn't too hot to sleep. The pool side restaurant had good food, and 5

days for 8 people was \$1008. The 5 bedroom condo could have easily accommodated 12 or 14 people, as many of the bedrooms had multiple beds. TV, stereo, microwave, dishwasher, etc., plus a nice veranda. We saw a number of sea horses, good size schools of fish, with an inordinate number of porcupine fish on all dives. Had a visit by the sea lions, and a rare 2-pass visit from a young whale shark. The sea floor and wall were all in good condition. We were looking for "new diver" opportunities and that was what we got - at no time were our new divers stressed. UW Photography Comments: There was no safe storage, and no rinse bucket. I was told to use the fresh water hose to rinse off my camera.

Cabo Pulmo

Cabo Pulmo Divers, Baja Paradise Vacation Rental, August 2005, Joel Snyder (jms@opus1.com), Tucson, AZ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 70 to 80 F, calm. This is primitive diving, but a lot of fun. Cabo Pulmo is in a Mexican marine park halfway between La Paz and Los Cabos. We got tired of the 1+ hour boat ride for La Paz dives, so came down here. The accommodations are great and the town is tiny—about 100 people. No nitrox, and the dive sites are barely defined—it's mostly the dive captain looking for a spot that has been good in the past, with a name made up on the spot. It's well done and everyone is friendly and accommodating. Most people in the town are related to each other, so there is a lot of cooperation and participation in whatever the guests want to do. We saw great things. Garden eels by the truckload, schools of Moorish idols, schooling pufferfish. Currents were moderate on some dives;

absent on others. Lots of nudibranchs, stonefish. Morays by the dozen, 2 or 3 at a time. It's not hard to get to (90 minute drive from Los Cabos airport, a little longer from La Paz).

Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, February 2006, Mickey Rosenberg, Providence, RI. (mickeyrosenberg@cox.net)

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 65 to 70 F, calm, choppy. I was aware that this time of year would not offer the best conditions (colder water, poorer viz, and more wind) than other times of year. Nonetheless, my dives with Carmel, an Israeli-born multilingual guide, were fun and interesting (30-45 ft) reef dives (mostly rock and scattered coral growing on it here and there). We saw schools of jacks, lots of puffers, a school of bat rays soaring above, many guitarfish (rays) in the sand, large bump heads, a rock mover wrasse, scorpion fish, etc. Between dives, we chased down and got close to Grey whales: a Mom and 1 or 2 calves that were obligingly breaching and showing tail. I also snorkeled in a huge school of jacks. One dive reminded me of New England — cold with 15 foot viz — a good day in New England! Carmel had a friend's digital camera with housing, and kindly e-mailed me some pictures of our dives, and the whales, that turned out quite well. The rental gear was decent, the pangas well made (they drag them up on a rocky beach — they must be tough) but minimal. Our rental Casita with kitchen and great shower was really nice and a 2 minute walk to the beach. No bugs this time of year (though the bed had mosquito netting) And always fabulous stars in the desert.

Huatulco

Hurricane Divers, Playa Santa Cruz,

October 2005, Chris Sobin, Colorado Springs, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives.

Water: 84 to 61 F, surge. The guides knew the area well, and were flexible about dive sites, and safety conscious. Guides all spoke excellent English. The equipment was all ScubaPro and well maintained. Their boat (Dignity) was scuba designed, has shade. Oxygen equipment was always aboard. We made one all day excursion including two dives, a tour of Huatulco's beaches, and a picnic lunch on the beach. The food was plentiful and simply outstanding. Fresh fruit was provided for us between dives. Rays abounded on the sandy bottoms and included leopard, butterfly, electric, whiptailed, and sting-rays. Jeweled, zebra and green morays were fairly numerous. Our guides also located seahorses, a sea turtle, an angel shark, conch, spiny lobsters, and hundreds of tropical fish among healthy white coral heads. The thermocline was pronounced, and wet suits were available if desired. We encountered 8ft. vis our first day and to about 25 by the end of our trip. Our depths ranged from 30 to 50 ft.

La Paz

Club Cantamar, September 2006, Randy Pedersen (divingwa@yahoo.com), Everett, WA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 83

to 86 F, calm. The resort was really nice and the people were friendly. My wife and I got the "full fare" meal package, which means 3 meals a day. Carbonated and alcoholic beverages were extra. The food was good and plentiful. The downside of this resort is, first, it is across the street from the main ferry terminal from Mazatlan. There were many trucks moving in and out of the area 24 hours a day. Also, there is a

waste treatment facility not too far away and some people who were in the building on the road side of the resort were complaining about that. We were in the building farthest from the road (next to the swimming pool) and were not bothered by the truck noise or the bad odor. The diving tended to be shallower reefs in less than 60 fsw for the most part. When we told them we were interested in more challenging dives they were accommodating. I went to La Paz to see hammerheads, whale sharks and manta rays and I came home having seen all three. The mantas are getting sparse (their words, not mine) due to over-fishing, as are the hammerheads. Both whale sharks I saw were fairly small — one being about 12 feet and the other 15 feet. The manta we saw was about 8 or 9 feet tip to tip. UW Photography Comments: The boat had a dry area in the cabin where cameras could be opened without fear of water splashing into them. There were also two rinse buckets on board.

Cortez Club, September 2005, Lisa Biesele (lisa@lisakristin.com), San Diego, CA. Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 70 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 86 F, calm, currents, no currents. My group of four dove for five days, and had our own private boat and divemaster. The Cortez Club sets your hotel reservation up with the adjoining hotel/condo rental place. Spend the extra few bucks and get the 3 bedroom penthouse condo all with ocean-view balconies! The resort is north of town, and you will have to take a taxi to dive. The food at the hotel was usual American-Mexican food. The dive club provides boxed lunches . . . I recommend the ceviche, not the sandwiches. The gear service was great . . . all washing, filling, etc. done while you go to the pool/bar/beach. Tip the divemaster and boat driver well. They

are paid a small amount and rely heavily on tips to live. The staff's attitude was great. The use of a small plane and walkie-talkies helped our boat to find mantas and whale sharks occasionally. The club throws a few night parties a week for clients. The waterfront Sea of Cortez location is beautiful for day dives and night parties/relaxation.

Loreto

Baja Outpost, April 2006, Camille Smith (csmith259@cox.net), Tempe, AZ. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 69 to 73 F, currents. Leon and Noellia Fisman's Baja Outpost is their vision realized for people enjoying nature, up close and personal. Baja Outpost offers diving, kayaking and horseback riding treks into the mountains around Loreto. Noellia's meals were 5 star. Guests are made to feel part of the family as we all come together under the palapa dining room. Each guest palapa is deluxe and include private baths, hot showers and A/C. The boat captains know just where to go and have a knack for engaging with the playful dolphins in the area. The divemaster was flexible and allowed for our greater dive experience. Per Leon, the best season for diving is coming up over the summer and into September. They also have whale watching expeditions December thru March. Loreto is a great town.

Dolphin Dive Center, Hotel La Pinta, September 2006, Steve Giles (stevegiles@verizon.net), Camarillo, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, calm. Owner Bruce Williams doubled as our dive master and went out of his way to accommodate individual requests and provide both historical information as

well as recommendations concerning local restaurants. The dive shop is relatively new and well maintained. Dolphin Divers joins forces with Hotel La Pinta to offer a combination dive/hotel package. The hotel suffered some heavy damage two weeks before our arrival at the hands of tropical storm John, but repair work was in progress. Black coral is abundant at the offshore islands of Coronado and Carmen in water as shallow as 60 fsw. The reefs are teeming with a wide variety of tropical critters inclusive of large groupers, morays, lobsters, angels, puffers, barracuda, sea lions, etc. On nearly every channel crossing en route to the nearby islands, large schools of dolphins were sighted. Diving is done from small boats which accommodated our party of 6 plus the boat captain and dive master comfortably.

Mulege

Cortez Explorers, February 2006, Debbie Husby (deb29palms@adelphia.net), Twentynine Palms, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 Feet. Water: 58 to 68 F, choppy. Sea lions are incredible. I took the trip to the islands (with overnight camping to maximize dive time and minimize travel time). The new owner, Mick, is doing great things with the shop and he's a topnotch teacher (and course director). We stayed in a motel in town, plain but charming, and visited the B&B/Spa on top of the hill for the hot tub and massage. The food in this town's great!

Puerto Vallarta

Pacific Scuba, May Dave Roberts. Experience: 225+ dives. The water is cold so they recommend 5 mil suits with head, hands and feet covered. Pacific provided the 5mil suit, BCD, octo, and weights. (They don't have

hood, gloves, booties). The owners — Linda, Nacho, and Ryan, the assistant, were topnotch. They offer package at 3 days for \$240, 4 days for \$300. They use a small boat with captain and divemaster. Water, sandwiches, fruit, and juice were readily available. We visited several varied sites: "Los Arcos," "Mariettas Islands," and my favorite, "Chimo," a small coastal fishing village where our guide, Nacho, grew up. He started diving at the age of ten, and knows the coral intimately. Nacho pointed to a distant fishing canoe with three men in it. One was his father. We pulled up beside them and five large manta rays swam by, exposing their extended, sixteen-foot-wide fin tips. Shortly thereafter we descended to the abundant coral. Seventy-five degrees at the surface turns into sixty-three as you descend. Also the cold encourages the growth of plankton, and mini jellyfish, which reduces visibility to 40 feet on a good day. As you drift down into canyons of healthy coral, the deep areas are dark and mysterious, the shadows of Mantas gliding above you. We encountered numerous "schools" of mating and feeding giant mantas which the captain stopped to let us jump in and snorkel with.

PVScuba, Velas Vallarta, July 2006, James T Frey (terryfrey@relax2smile.com), North Vernon, IN. Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 65 to 85 F, choppy, surge. Dive master, Alex Vega, did a remarkable job in helping us with our dives. His attention to details was greatly appreciated.

San Carlos

Ocean Sports, July 2006, John Swearingen, Turlock, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 89F, calm. Gary's Diving in San Carlos was

disorganized, vague about what trips to dive. We went with Ocean Sports, a better, faster boat. All dives were at the island with the sea lions. Good shallow diving for beginners and other divers could dive on their own. Sea lions, lots of fish and macro.

Zihuatanejo

Zihuatanejo Dive Center, June 2006, Christopher Diaz (cdiaz71@hotmail.com), Winchester, KY. Experience: 40 dives. Vis: 30 to 35 feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, strong currents. Divemaster Nadia is an excellent guide. As I was the only other diver on the boat she took good care of me. However, other than a turtle, some eels, and schools of jacks, there wasn't much to see.

PANAMA

Panama, January 2006, Harvey Monroe (CheMono@aol.com), Santa Fe, NM. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 85. I have been to Panama several times, so this trip was an attempt to sample most of the areas in the country with my family, all divers. We did not head for Bocas del Toro due to its reputation for lower visibility and a more touristy atmosphere. Caribbean coast — Portabelo is a historic area with numerous Spanish forts and installations. It has a mostly African-Caribbean influenced-culture. The diving wasn't spectacular for visibility, with the closer sites having particulate in the water. However, the fauna was brilliant in color and variety. The sites farther out, in particular, Salmedina Reef, had a profusion of larger tropicals, midnight parrots, 3'-4' long and hordes of schooling fish. The area is subject to

rougher seas. There are several dive and hotel accommodations, which average \$30-\$80 a night. The outfit we dove with provided a basic panga with a knowledgeable captain who was also a qualified divemaster but didn't dive. A single tank dive was \$15 to \$25 depending on the distance from the dock. We were able to explore on our own. We rented tanks and drove up the coast to Isla Grande and dove off a private island. There were several restaurants and most reasonably priced or cheap. Caribbean Jimmy's farther up the coast was closed for the season, which I discovered after hiking halfway through the tropical forest, which was fun. The windy season is December thru March, with rough seas making it almost impossible to get off the beach in a boat. The staff weren't friendly and I didn't see anything at the operation that would convince me to go back, especially at their prices. Although, farther out is the Coral Lodge, near San Blas, which has a reputation for excellent if not pricey diving. The Pacific Coast: There were several regions that we explored. The Pacific is known for high tidal exchange with associated currents, more variable temperatures and visibility. The corals are more limited and the bottom is mostly rocky but the number and size of fish more than makes up for the lack of fauna. We tried to dive near David and with Chiriqui Divers. The operation is about 20 miles down a dirt road that is barely passable during the rainy season without a 4x4. The cost for the dive was over \$200 to a sea mount that was reputed to have schools of mantas and hammerheads. The owner, though a U.S. Navy diver, was not someone we could trust. We stopped for lunch before returning to the highway. The area reminded of a drunken pirate's den