

MEXICO

Guadalupe Island

Great White Adventures, September 2006, Lupo (lupodiver@mac.com), Miami Beach, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, calm. Staff have been working together for years and are happy and efficient. They could not have been nicer. Food was excellent (thanks Randy). Rooms were a little small but there was lots of space on the boat. On our checkout dive (cage), we had a 12-foot great white show up and for the next 3 days we had more and more with the big daddy being 14ft. and 3000 pounds. He was named Spot. The bait was pulled closer to the cages by the surface support crew when a shark came near to give us a better close-up. I took over 1000 photos and 50 video clips. Sometimes the sharks bumped the cages. The operation is safe. We climbed into the cage and watched sharks circling while the underwater speakers and bait kept the sharks close by. The submersible cage was exciting. This cage is lowered 20 feet below the boat so you can get a different look and an additional thrill. Scott Davis was in this cage with one diver to be the eyes in the back of you. This operation is for any shark lover, any non diver who would like to see sharks close up and any photographer. We also had a couple mako sharks come by, dolphins, and a turtle. Great place to get engaged also. UW Photography Comments: Lots of charging stations and room.

MV Islander Shark Dive, November 2005, Mark Cortright (lhp3@cox.net), Arcata, CA. Both the charter operator and boat owners were aboard this last-of-7 trips of the season. There is no

camera table on board or camera storage space other than your cabin, which you cannot access when wet (it's a dive trip so one is wet a lot). We took over a galley table with cameras and were willing to eat around our photo gear but had to move it every meal. The crew is not used to diver's needs. An example would be a flooded dry suit when one needs to dry their wet undergarments, you hang them in the motor room where it is hot. This seemed to be a big deal. We were told that they had never seen camera gear like ours, which was just a few housed SLRs in Subal and Aquatica housings with 2 strobes. Something we have shot for 20 + years around the planet. We always use 2 strobes. It was strongly suggested that only one strobe was needed. I love the 2-strobe shots we got. We had dry suits to dive without being cold in the 65 degree water. Since I dove several 3 hour periods straight, I would only want to do this in a dry suit. Many a freezing wet suit diver would sit out and warm up. This boat did not have any spots to hang dry suits away from wet suits. We were easy to please, since we did not care much about the alcohol or food aboard, but we do care about photo-friendly vessels. The rules are that you are assigned a spot in the cage and a team, and that you get to dive that spot every other dive in rotation with your team. This was true until the last dive when the rules changed and a few did not get their rotation spot, because some of us made so many dives in empty spots that they wanted others to view the shark when he finally came around. Rule #1 do not change the rules. All these issues are easy to fix, such as a temporary plywood table for cameras over the unused bait tanks. Speaking of bait, this trip ran short and needed more. We were told to surface

and tell the deck hands that the shark was near so they could jerk away the bait, as they were low on it. This is counter to getting great shark photos. Each cage dive is \$250. Shark shows up, and do you shoot photos or surface to tell crew to jerk away bait? Extra lines in water are not good for photos. They need to clean up the lines in the water for better photo-ops. The bait needs to be hung behind the cages, not off the side of the boat, as the sharks then are all next to the boat and not behind the cage. This means the boat is in most all photos as the sharks are next to boat. They did a better job at the end, but as this was their last trip, it seems the learning curve was a little slow. We did get good shark photos despite these minor woes. If you like cheap wine and good food this is your boat and operator. If you want the best shark photos steer clear.

Solmar V, September 2005, Greg Galland, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Experience: 2000+ dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: calm and flat. The opportunity to join Guy Harvey on his fiftieth birthday to film a documentary on great white sharks is the pinnacle of my scuba diving career. The Solmar V left Ensenada, Mexico, and made the 160-mile crossing to the island of Guadalupe. Under the capable guidance of Lawrence Groth and his adept crew, we awakened at a barren volcanic island (population: 50) 40 miles long and 20 miles wide. On the west side of the island, we dropped anchor and proceeded to chum for the great white sharks. Almost immediately the great whites appeared behind the baits. We descended into the aluminum cages eight by five feet with escape doors on top. The 68-degree temperature did not seem worrisome as the adrenalin was pumping. These awesome critters were

large, powerful, sleek and agile. The sharks were mostly male and ranged from eight feet to eighteen feet. The largest weighed between 1500 pounds and 2000 pounds. The excellent visibility allowed us to watch the behavioral patterns and produce great video and still photography. A yellow fin tuna was tied by the tail and thrown beyond the cages. As the shark approaches, the wrangler pulls the bait closer to the cage to facilitate great photography. Simultaneously, bloody chum was thrown over the sides. The sharks circled the cages, moving closer with each pass. These are calculating, intelligent predators that definitely have a game plan. Their gliding pattern to the cages is smooth and non-threatening. It is only after they decide to attack the bait that their movement is lightning-fast and aggressive. Only on one pass did a shark get caught between the cages thrashing his body and tail, giving Guy Harvey quite a birthday present. On another occasion, Bruce, the largest of the group of sharks, whipped his tail at the cage just to let Guy know who was the alpha male. There was also a submersible cage with an open top lowered to thirty feet and you could stand at the top with your feet braced on the upper level with your body out of the cage. Here you could see the action of the surface cages and the behemoths as they came out of the deep blue. Their passes again were not threatening. It was tempting to dive freely with these predators. Common sense prevailed and I fought the beckoning of the sirens. A great white had encircled itself with a white plastic packing strap behind the gills and forward of his pectoral fins. After several attempts and patient waiting, Lawrence Groth was able to use a curved razor attached to a pole to cut

the strap. We joined up with Michael Domeier, whom Guy Harvey had previously helped set pop-up tags the previous year. Five pop-up tags were scheduled to be released during our adventure. Only one was recorded to have been released at the set time. The satellite tag was 1,000 miles away and irretrievable. The tags are about \$4,000 apiece and there is obviously room for technical improvement. Michael designed a camera with two parallel laser beams that on a photograph could be used to measure the length of sharks. The laser beams were out of parallel and not sufficiently accurate to measure the growth of the sharks. Technical modifications are required before this can be used for scientific recordings. Mahmood Shivji of the Guy Harvey Institute at Nova Southeastern University suggested that DNA fingerprinting could be used to study the migratory habits of the great white sharks. Michael Domeier has identified some sixty great whites in the Guadalupe area. They are there from July to December, with the juveniles arriving early, followed by the predominance of males in September and females late in December. The great white sharks then return to the deep Pacific waters from January to June to mix with their brethren from the Farallon Islands. Michael Domeier believes that the great white sharks return to their original areas and do not mix when they return each year.

Solmar V, August 2006, Carol Schoelch, St. Louis, MO. I had signed up last year for a trip in August. We were scheduled to fly into San Diego, spend the night at a local hotel and get picked up by bus the next morning for the 2-hour drive to Ensenada, Mexico. We then boarded the boat for the 18-hour trip to the island. For some

reason, the Mexican government was telling us that we needed a permit to leave the harbor, and the harbor master was not going to let us leave without this permit. All afternoon, the crew and Lawrence from Great White Adventures were doing all they could to get this permit, running here and there, talking to multiple individuals, to no avail. At 6 pm that night, Lawrence called us all to the galley and told us they were going to have to cancel the trip. Of course this was a disappointment to us, but they really took care of us. Long story short, we were all reimbursed our cost of airline tickets to get there and back, and the cost of an early flight home, meal expenses on the trip home, the expense of the trip, which was approximately \$2,800, and we were also given a voucher for a free trip on the Solmar V to use within a year! The cancellation was due to the Mexican Government, and not Great White Adventures or the Solmar V, but they stepped up to the plate and took responsibility. I rescheduled my Great White Adventures trip to Isla Guadalupe on the Solmar V August 2006. Incredible trip. The first thing we saw was a baby whale shark, which was the first time a whale shark was ever seen in those waters. We then got to cage dive with Great Whites. As we got out of the cold water and took off our cold, wet wetsuits, the staff was there with hot chocolate ready to pour for you! The service was incredible all the way from the kitchen to room service to dive service. I just had to stand still and they strapped on my weights and checked my mask for any leaks and in the water we went! On the first day I asked Pepe, our room steward, for an extra towel, as my hair takes a lot of towels to dry. Each day after that I had 2 towels sitting on my bed for when I took a shower. The food was incredible.

Solmar V, September 2006, Jim Harris, Benbrook, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 70 to 71 F, calm, no currents. 22-hour crossing from Ensenada to Guadalupe Island makes for ripe conditions for seasickness. Return trip had 4-6' beam seas and several people sick after only taking OTC pills. My Transderm Scop patch + ginger pills did the trick. 3 days of cage diving with great white sharks, and the sharks did not disappoint. Saw 7 different 12-13' great whites and one mako, and they would stay with the boat for 8 or so hours per day so plenty of face-time with everyone taking 1-hour turns in the cages. Water was the clearest I've ever seen, making for great photos without a flash, and attacks on the hanging baits could easily be seen and photographed from the top deck. Words can't describe seeing a 13' great white just a few feet from the cage, nor can they describe the feeling of having one attack the cage while you are in it (completely safe, the attack was caused by a hanging bait handler mistakenly pulling the bait in toward our cage). Two-man submersible cage (to 35') and being allowed to get out of it with great whites in the area is another rush. Sharks were curious about it being so deep so I had numerous close approaches. Strobes aren't needed for the topside cages, but for this cage you will need a strobe. Never felt I was in danger, and it was obvious by Great White Adventures' and the Solmar V's crews' actions that the sharks' well-being is their first concern. Several dry-suits, lots of 7mm suits with hoods and gloves, only people cold were those who'd spend 2 hours in the cages at times when there was limited shark action. You're potentially back in the cages every other hour so hoods and gloves will help keep you warm

throughout the days. Hookah rigs worked fine, although the mouthpiece wasn't the most comfortable. Solmar V is a nice boat, great crew, great salon, with my only complaints that the cabins are on the small side with low ceilings (5'10") and the bunks aren't the most comfortable. Next time may go 3-4 weeks later than this 9/11 trip, possibly see bigger sharks when the female great whites show up. UW Photography Comments: 2 rinse buckets, huge camera table, multiple outlets inside the salon for charging batteries (don't want you charging batteries in your cabin due to fire concerns). Topside cages had an opening 18" tall to stick cameras outside the cage (at least one housing on our trip was taller than that).

Sea of Cortez

Don Jose, Baja Expeditions, September 2006, Mark Rosenstein (mar@actwin.com), Cambridge, MA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm, currents, no currents. Huge schools of medium sized fish: scads, goatfish, jacks, etc. Sea lions at most sites. Interesting tiny gobies. Not much coral, but rocky terrain still housed much life. Too bad hammerheads, mantas and whale sharks are no longer seen often. Plenty of electric outlets in cabin. Only a tiny space on dive deck to set cameras. Large dedicated rinse bucket.

Socorro/Revillagigedo Islands

Nautilus Explorer, October 2005, Ted and Natalie Lee (whitesirocco@yahoo.com), Mill Valley, CA. Experience: 51 to 100 dives. Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 82 degrees. Flew directly to Cabo San Lucas,

25 min. taxi to Los Patios Hotel to meet the group, then a 2.5 hour air-conditioned bus ride to La Paz to board the 116-ft. ship. The ship is spacious, with a large lounge with TV and computers, separate dining area, dive deck, and two sundecks, one with a hot tub. The hull with bulbous bow was stable, though seas were calm. There are three different prices for staterooms: deluxe suite, standard cabin and dormitory bunks. We stayed in a cabin, which is compact with one double and one single bed, and has a small porthole. A fan is provided, which we needed because the A/C couldn't keep up with the heat. Standard American and Mexican fare served buffet-style. It was average, but it hit the spot. Wine/beer was extra. Dive deck has lots of room, with two showerheads, but no bathroom. Assigned stations had bins for gear, and you gear up while standing. A short walk down the ramp and you board the aluminum skiff with stairs built into the bow. There was also a smaller inflatable panga. There was a large camera table on the dive deck, which also had some storage space beneath for camera cases. A charging table was also nearby, with plenty of plug space, but this area could get splashed by passing divers and one diver had a charger short out. Lighting was good. The crew is cheerful and hard-working. Safety was a high priority including use of DAN tags and always having a crewed skiff in the water while divers were out. Capt. Mike Lever actively solicited suggestions for improvement, often implementing them right away. Guests: 22 (2 non-divers), all from US or Canada. Experience ranged from 50 to thousands of dives, most in the hundreds. Two used semi-closed rebreathers, and several were professional photographers. Most dived in 3 mm full suits or skins. We used

tropical beanies. Gloves were permitted. Use a full skin at least as there were lots of small jellies in the water at many sites. Good briefings. The "pool" was typically open from 8am to 8pm, with an average of four dives/day. Nitrox 32 was the gas of choice for most. There were steel 100 tanks available for a fee, which they donate to a local turtle conservation agency. Divemaster-guided dives were always available. A safety sausage is recommended. A safety sausage is recommended. We liked diving at La Reina, with its varied topography, huge ball of scad, and a sea lion that danced circles around us. Las Animas had a strong current, and most divers tucked into the rock crevices to stay out of the worst of it. Diving at Cabo Pulmo marine sanctuary was from small locally hired pangas who then motored into the sanctuary. These were drift dives in one of the only reef systems in western North America. There were huge squadrons of pufferfish and large grouper, including an impressive golden leopard grouper. We had two guided blue water dives at El Bajo, which yielded our only sighting of a lone hammerhead (although the rebreather folks had seen a few while diving deep). We were at 110 feet and the shark was about 30 feet below. There were several night dives; our favorite was Los Islotes, where you could swim into a little cavern where sea lions hang out. Back in La Paz we saw a tiny yellow seahorse on the wreck of the *Salvatierra*. We were the least experienced, but probably enjoyed the diving the most. Others who had been to Cocos or Galapagos before were bored with the diving in Cortez. According to the DMs, the abundance of marine life has declined, even at the marine sanctuary, due to overfishing. No more schools of hammerheads at El Bajo. Non-diving activities included snorkel-

ing, kayaking, and a free-diving clinic. We also had an evening shore excursion to visit a turtle nesting beach near Cabo Pulmo. Manuel, a local volunteer turtle conservationist, showed us a nest site, with eggs that looked like deflated ping pong balls. Mike hired an ultralight to scout for whale sharks. Each of the two groups had the chance to snorkel from the skiff. Visibility was limited by huge clouds of plankton, on which the whale shark was feeding. The whale shark would appear out of the haze, its great shadow looming closer until you could see its form with clarity as it passed by at arms length.

Nautilus Explorer, December 2005, Jill Crocker (crockerjc@sbcglobal.net), Austin, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 74 F, choppy, surge, currents. We arrived in Cabo San Lucas and were taken to a nearby hotel, then took a 2 hour bus ride to the marina in La Paz. We were greeted by the Nautilus staff, who took our bags either to the dive deck or to our rooms. Once we settled in, we had dinner. We did a safety drill with life jackets. Our room had plenty of storage space. Then we had a 30 hours ride to the diving, but we enjoyed relaxing and sleeping and visiting. Captain Mike, who also owns the boat, was on top of everything. They could have used another ice machine, but boat was well stocked and clean. The staff was friendly and helpful. Everyone was required to attend the dive briefing the night before diving. The chef, Vickie, was from New Zealand, and although she prepared some unique dishes that were uncommon to us "southerners." I enjoyed the variety! The food was hot and plentiful. The diving was great! We saw mantas, sharks, hammerheads and dolphins. Whales were seen at a distance. We were told we could

"interact" with the mantas on their terms. We would reach our hand up, and the mantas would glide over our hands. We were not allowed to "ride" the mantas, and we were warned if we did that, our trip would be over. We were told not to pet the top of the mantas as well. We did some planned "blue water" dives, which were great. Many saw schools of hammerheads. We also saw a den of white tip sharks. Nitrox and steel tanks were available for a fee. Safety stops were encouraged. Gloves and lights are not allowed. Safety sausages and Dive Alerts were provided. One girl went sailing while others kayaked. The hot tub was always inviting! We spent the evenings either looking at each other's photos, or viewing the videos shot during the day. Movies were available. Our room was a little warm (no top sheets were on the beds, just a comforter, which was a little warm) but we had 2 fans. There was plenty of hot water. overall, it was a great way to ring in the new year!

Nautilus Explorer, January 2006, John Kontnik, Lakewood, CO. Experience: 1000+ dives. We have dived the Explorer before, in British Columbia and were impressed, and were also impressed on this trip. Mike Lever, owner and captain, runs an efficient and safe, well-oiled operation. Food was good, crew was great, and the home office was able to answer questions accurately and promptly. This was our second trip to the Revillagigedo Islands; the first was on the Solmar, which I hated, and it was refreshing to see some competition. The sharks, mantas, tuna, huge schools of fish are all still there. Intense in-your-face encounters with mantas. The major differences between the two boats is that the Explorer and its staff really work with the guests for a thorough explanation of dive sites and

interaction protocol. The Explorer goes to some different and more exciting sites. The non-dive staff was also excellent and always available. This is also an ecology-sensitive boat (no shark feeding off the back of the boat, especially while divers are in the water). I also like the boat's approach to three different prices and quality of accommodations; it allows the budget diver some opportunities. Also, Mike does not cut deals here and there as you will find on the Solmar (when we were on the Solmar, there were three different prices for the trip – thankfully, we had paid the least or I would have been angry —other guests were).

Nautilus Explorer, January 2006, Peter Sonbert, Jupiter, FL. Experience: 250 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 feet. Water: 72 to 74 F, choppy, surge, strong currents. I was OK with a 3-mil shorty over a 3 mil hooded vest. My wife was OK with a 5-mil full, but half the people wore drysuits. The wine was not free. Crew great and safe.

Solmar V, April 2006, Daniel Mann (dmann@chi.osu.edu), Columbus, OH. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 120 Feet. Water: 71 to 75 F, calm, no currents. The Solmar V is a well-maintained live-aboard out of Cabo San Lucas. You make your own arrangements for transportation from the airport to the boat (not a big hassle but allow ~1 hr once you clear customs to get to the boat). The open ocean crossing from Cabo to the Socorro Islands takes more than 24 hrs and some passengers were sea sick. Once at the islands, seas were quiet and no one had a problem. Adequate bunk beds, small bathroom in each cabin, limited storage so pack light. Food was plentiful and tasty. Crew was helpful and attentive. Seeing giant manta rays (20 ft

wing span) is virtually guaranteed. Every diver had the opportunity to dive with multiple mantas as well as six species of sharks on nearly every dive. Several divers had repeated up-close manta encounters when the manta stopped directly above and the diver was able to stroke the manta's underbelly. The last two days at the Roca Partida dive site a mother humpback whale (~42 ft) and her baby (~15 ft) stayed around the Solmar V. At the end of each dive, we left our BC/tanks/regs on the inflatable and snorkeled with mother and baby humpback. The mother allowed the baby to surface repeatedly among the snorkelers and at times you literally found yourself looking into the baby whale's eye only 2 feet away. It is hard to state the emotions that you feel when interacting with a sentient being such as a humpback whale but some described this trip as a life-altering experience. Many dives resulted in spotting schools of hammerhead sharks, as well as white tips, silkies, silver tips, duskies, and Galapagos sharks. We also had opportunities to enter a rocky cavern and lie beside 5-10 "sleeping" white tip reef sharks. Pods of dolphins often made passes through the divers but didn't hang around long. Huge schools of fish were dense enough to block out the sun. Macro photo opportunities were plentiful. The Socorro Islands area is protected by regulations that prohibit night diving. Dedicated rinse tank for cameras refilled with fresh water daily. Dedicated camera table had adequate space for all photographers onboard. Suitable recharging stations provided for batteries. Good digital equipment for digital video cameras.

Solmar V, July 2005, James Rieter (james_rieter1@hotmail.com), Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 101-250 dives.

Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm. Betty and I arrived 4 days early and stayed at the Solmar Hotel, within walking distance from town and near an empty white sand beach facing the Pacific Ocean. Great food, nice pool and room. Rooms are small on the Solmar V and were in an upgraded room. We would have to ask for snacks between dives and sometimes did not get them or they would arrive during the next dive! I had to bitch to the cook on the 2nd day. We should not have to beg for food on a high end live aboard. The rest of food was just ok. The dive crew was not too bad as DMs, nice group of guys. Two Pangas are in the water at all times when divers are in the water to keep an eye out for you and pick you up if you prefer a ride back to the boat. Betty loved the chase of a pod of pilot whales that they first thought were dolphins on one panga. We also spent most of a glorious day diving with sea lions. With a full boat we had a lot of equipment; we all worked together well so room was adequate.

Solmar V, October 2005, Don "Digger" Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net), Glendora, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm. Third trip on Solmar V. Crew was excellent. Dive Masters quickly became friends and made trip a great one. Food was good and plentiful. If you wanted something, all you had to do was ask. Rooms are not large but adequate if you don't bring a ton of clothes. Nominally 4 day dives a day and three night dives during trip. Water was warm and had a 3mm wetsuit and a 1mm would have worked better. Visibility varied but was only marginal on the fourth dive one day. Fish life was great. Must be the porcupine puffer fish capital of the world. Saw many on every dive, sometimes in schools of 30

or more. Plentiful other species in pairs and schools. We saw 5 whale sharks feeding, and went in without tanks to watch. Visibility was poor, maybe 4 feet due to concentration of plankton whale sharks were feeding on. And they were constantly moving faster than we could swim alongside. So we got 20 or so seconds of watching before they were past. We then went back into Pangas and raced ahead of them to again dive in and repeat the process. Dive sites ranged from north of La Paz to just north of Cabo San Lucas.

PANAMA

MV Coral Star, April 2006, Tracy Johnson (tracy@coastvideo.com), Manhattan Beach, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 Feet. Water: 74 to 82 F, currents. This was my sixth trip on a Panamanian live-aboard. Lots of white tip sharks resting in caves and on the bottom. Frog fish, lots of lobsters and eels, plus sea horses. On one previous trip I spent my safety stop in the middle of a school of dolphin. The trip starts at the Caesar Park Hotel, Panama City. Early the next morning we fly to David and it's a short ride to the boat dock. We board Pursuits for a two-hour ride down river to the mother ship. The ship has 8 cabins and each has baths and air conditioning. There is a small personal fan in each cabin, which worked well. We had 3 fishermen (2 ladies, 1 man) and 9 divers. The fishermen leave early in the morning on 28 foot Pursuits. Coral Star has a fleet of ocean fishing/diving boats to take us to dive sites quickly. Fishing is an option during intervals. The size of their fleet provides the Coral Star with more than adequate backup should there be mechanical failure. They even