

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

with our kids picking up several new unrepeatable expressions. Santa Catalina and Isla Coiba – This was recently written up in *Undercurrent* and I do think the diving is as good as represented. It is a basic town with several inexpensive accommodations and restaurants but still unspoiled. There are two operations, Herbie's or Scuba Coiba and Scuba-Charters. We had arranged for a trip with Scuba Coiba but due to several missed connections, not necessarily our fault, were bumped from their roster for a Coiba dive. From what I hear talking to locals, this is common. Scuba Charters is run by a couple from Jacksonville, Florida. They are a modest operation compared with many Caribbean destinations. The diving is worth experiencing, with good to excellent conditions and unexplored areas that provide a great opportunity for exploring. Both operations fill their boats and there is no shore diving, so reserve in advance. The Pearl Islands, in particular Isla Contadora, is due west of Panama City. It's about a ½ hour plane flight on a small twin engine plane. This is a destination resort island, with 2 modern hotels and many more modest bed and breakfasts. The island is scenic and laid-back at only 3-4 miles long and less than a mile wide. There are several upper-class homes on the island. This was also the staging area for two of the *Survivor Panama* shows. Diving is provided by Coral Dreams, owners Guillermo and Roxanne. They are connected with the local hotels but independent. They are also a modest operation and mostly cater to the resort crowd. There are several sites that have a profusion of large fish. The visibility can vary and the currents are dependent on the tides, which can be up to 20 feet. I have been to few places that have

the quantity and profusion of fish we experienced.

**Panama Divers, Coco Plum Resort Portobello, December 2005, Yvonne Lanelli, NM.** Experience: 350 dives. Vis: 30 feet. Water: 82 degrees F, calm. Portobello is on the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama. First dive: Drake's Island, named after Sir Francis Drake, but nicknamed Sponge City. Following a smooth ride in a new boat (space for eight divers, radio, PFDS, first aid kit and 02, no head), we arrived in less than 30 minutes. "You'll see every color sponge and soft coral imaginable," promised Panama Divers co-owner and DM Clay. True. At 83 feet we found rocky outcroppings crammed with hundreds of barrel sponges, some as big as wine casks, whips longer than a compact car, forests of tube sponges, platter corals you could serve a side of beef on, brain corals as big as beach balls, salad bar-sized lettuce corals, crinoids, and more, all in every hue Clay promised, even at depth. Also schools of queen angels, snapper, a foot-long grouper, numerous schools of tiny neon-like blue chromis and others. I discovered a quivering spotted drumfish, its dorsal fin trailing like a nervous bride's veil. Dive limits: 1,000 PSI after 3,000 PSI fill in aluminum 80. We docked at the ruins of an old Spanish fort for our surface interval and included lunch: giant sub sandwiches on French rolls, fruit, cookies, water and a selection of cold soft drinks. Second dive: Avion and Avion Reef, "where a twin Constellation crashed 11 years ago in a storm, running drugs and flying low to avoid radar. No drugs now, but you can swim through. Silty. Avion Reef has fish and sponges, not as many as Drake's Island, but lots of swim-throughs with swim-around options. Coco Plum Resort

(\$49.50 double occupancy, two double beds, A/C, TV, no hot water or hanging space, restaurant attached. Dinner: spaghetti with paprika chicken \$13.00; breakfast: scrambled eggs and coffee \$2.40) No night life. Since we planned to dive the next day on the Pacific side with Clay, he offered to drive us to Panama City (about an hour) and find us a room for the night. Panama Divers, Balboa (suburb of Panama City) and Albrook Inn (a small B and B on Calle Gardenia in an elegant residential neighborhood, \$65 double occupancy, two double beds, A/C, TV, hot water shower, big closet, continental breakfast. Cab to restaurants or nightlife). Clay picked us up the next morning and drove us ten minutes to Panama Divers' main dive op. After an hour ride, we anchored at Otoki Island for the first of two dives with John Kim as DM. There was significant current. Boat the same size and amenities as yesterday. Viz was 10 feet at best. At 73 feet we found several rock outcroppings populated with occasional fish. Clay found a quiet little beach for lunch, a delicious duplicate of yesterday's picnic. Clouds and wind built up before our second dive, increasing the current and decreasing the viz to about 5 feet. At the Wall, we stayed close to John around rocks at 48 feet. Unremarkable. John and Clay's entertaining commentaries on life as ex-pats in Panama plus their helpfulness during dives, clean boats and dive ops, suggestions for our off-gassing, pre-flight day and overall professionalism convinced us we'd dive with them again. Clay and his partner bought out Twin Divers. Spend the morning at Casco Viejo, Panama City's old part of town that resembles New Orleans's French Quarter in architecture and ambience. Of note: the Museo del Canal Inter-oceánico (Panama

Canal Museum), \$5 admission includes English audio. In the afternoon, walk (20 minutes) or cab (\$1) to Plaza Cinco de Mayo, one end of a ten-block long outdoor pedestrian market on Calle Central with stores, food booths, souvenir stands and bargains (45 cents for a triple scoop ice cream cone). Speak Spanish or pantomime.

**Panama Divers and Dutch Pirate, January 2006, Bill Mashek (rubicon@sonc.net), Santa Rosa, CA.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to Feet. Water: 82 F. Panama is a good place for a lot of activities. Made diving arrangements with Panama Divers ahead of time, we flew into Panama City and the next morning, Clay, owner of Scuba Panama picked me up at my hotel. We drove to Portobelo to a small hotel and one boat dock. It only took about 15 minutes to get to our dive spot near Drakes Island. Our first dive was about 110 ft. Things didn't get "provocative" until you hit 90+ ft. Lots of interesting corals. A couple of turtles, lobster, strange macros made for excellent pictures. Lots of spotted drums. Nothing "epic" but fun. Cost was \$125, which made multiple dives out of my reach. The next day did a couple days of great rafting then went to Bocas Del Toro. For surfers, there are some great surf spots. Strong reef breaks, best for short boards due to the steep drops. While in Bocas I attended Spanish School (Spanish by the Sea) for a week. Bocas is your typical Caribbean backpackers island. Nothing real fancy lodging is simple and inexpensive, food around the island is varied and ok, not great and lots of inexpensive crafts from street artists. The language school experience was excellent. Part of their program included diving. I took advantage. I dove with Dutch Pirate. Rolf (owner and instructor) is a great

guy and his girlfriend/divemaster is a teacher at the Spanish school and use to be a dolphin trainer at Anthony's Key Resort in Roatan. We dived six different spots between Isla Colon and Bastaimentos. Diving was shallow, no deeper than 40ft. The water was extremely calm, no currents. We dived one interesting wreck. Diving Panama (on the Caribbean side) was OK. Not fantastic. Fish are not prolific.

**Panama Divers, Coral Lodge, March 2006, David Savage, New Albany, OH. (savage1710@yahoo.com)** Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, choppy, no currents. Coral Lodge is a new resort in an unspoiled, remote area of Panama. Since the only access to the resort is by boat, we combined the trip from Portobello to the resort with diving. The Lodge arranges its diving with Panama Divers. The reefs off Santa Isabel are largely unexplored since the area is so remote. We even have a reef named after us now, since we were the first to dive it. We could not have enjoyed this trip more, as Clay, the owner of Panama Divers, was an incredible guide. His knowledge of the area, and his attention to our enjoyment and safety made the diving all the more fascinating. The Coral Lodge is a beautiful new resort with only 6 overwater bungalows.

**Panama Divers, June 2006, Jack Adams (jack.adams@international.gc.ca), Ottawa, On.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 45 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, no currents. The operation was friendly and well managed. I was picked up at my hotel and dropped back there at the end of the dive. The drive to the site took an hour, from Panama City to Colon and then to Portobello on the Caribbean. You could rent good quality gear for \$US25 for the two dive trip.

The boat was excellent with a small cover just aft of forward for the driver and twin 140HP outboards. The operation was managed professionally, all the crew helping with gear putting on and removal. The boat driver was competent, friendly and helpful. Most of the crew spoke English and Spanish. A great lunch and lots of water/sodas provided between dives. One dive was on a ditched aircraft at 60 ft, a twin Beech that was apparently running drugs. There were some nice canyons nearby. The dive boat, about 25ft fiberglass was not set up for photographers.

**Scuba Coiba, June 2006, Larry Polster, (larrypolster@sbcglobal.net), Martinsville, IN.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F. Non-diving spouse had to sit at the cabin because the beach was not designed to accommodate tourists; it's a fishing village. Breakfast was about \$1.50, most dinners were under \$10 and there are a few more rooms available to rent with the large number of surfers. The trip to Coiba island in the small dive boat, 1.5 hours and bumpy, but worth the trouble for great diving. We had surface intervals at the ranger station and brought our own snacks and drinks; none provided by the dive shop. You could schedule overnight trips with food provided and would recommend it, if you dive more than one day, to prevent the rough boat ride and time on top of the water. We followed in footsteps of the Undercurrent author in March 2006 issue. You don't need a 4-wheel drive car anymore; the road is paved all the way to Santa Catalina. Surfing is big and the restaurants have expanded to four. Some of the best diving ever with lots of fish, all species and sizes. With changing currents the vis could start

with 20' and improve before the end of the dive to 80'. Reef sharks every dive from a couple to over twenty, 4 frog fish on three different dives. One Goliath grouper weighing several hundred pounds followed us for 10 minutes. Rachel did a great job leading all dives and her crew were entertaining.

## UNITED STATES

### Alaska

#### **The Dive Shop, Moby Dick Hostel, June 2006, Yvonne Lanelli, NM.**

Experience: 350 dives. Bring a drysuit, expedition weight undergarment, dry gloves and a regulator set for no less than 45 degrees F. sea water in Resurrection Bay at Seward, AK. Ed Lindquist, owner of The Dive Shop in Sterling, AK takes four divers on a clean 22' Seasport with radio, cell phone, DAN O2, head and dry space to a variety of shallow wrecks and sea-mounts in the Bay. I saw sea lions, plumose anemones, and lingcod as large as a small human, sea pens, whips, lion mane jellies, sunflower stars, saucer-sized nudibranchs, rockfish, sculpins and greenlings in approx. 1.5 knot current. Two humpback whales surfaced within 15 yards of the boat. Ed's seen orcas, wolf eels, salmon, crab, lobster and sea otters. Ed is generous and helpful, lending equipment and advice. For cheap digs, try Moby Dick Hostel. At \$55-\$65 per night, two people can sleep dry and comfortable if they don't mind sharing a large, clean bathroom and kitchen.

### California

#### Monterey

**Aquarius 2, December 2005, Arik Olson (arikolson@yahoo.com), New**

**York, NY.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 5 to 10 Feet. Water: 50 to 55 F, surge. The diving is good in Northern California in December. The water temp doesn't really change much, it's always cold. I made a reservation to dive in Point Lobos state Park (\$10 for two people) via the state park website and booked a guide and rental equipment through Aquarius 2 dive shop. The guide was great, real mellow and perceptive as to my goals (a nice safe low stress long dive) and needs (help with kelp). The equipment was in good condition. We did two dives at Whalers cove and I was impressed. Despite a good deal of surge I saw a lot of sponges, corals, rock formations, many nudibranchs, and many more fish than dives I had made the year before in Monterey bay. Point Lobos has been protected for many years (from fishing) and it shows in the fish population. Don't worry about diving the same site twice, Whalers cove is large and has several different dives available. Bring a beach mat in the car for equipment set up as the parking lot is sandy.

#### Catalina Island

#### **Catalina Divers Supply, September 2005, Ron Kloberdanz (infinite-entropy@engineer.com), Fairfield, CA.**

Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 68 to 77 F, surge, currents. We went on a 2-tank boat dive to two locations. Good: Lots of different, interesting fish. Friendly Garibaldi, beautiful kelp forests. Shop crew friendly and helpful. Were able to make our own dive plan. Saw our first shark (leopard). Little pre-information for those of us who had only tropical diving experience. We were expected to set up our own rental gear, had to tank up and walk to aft of rocking boat in full 12mm suit +25-30lb. weight, and