

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

have a 56-foot LCM support boat to bring fuel to the mother ship. Most dive trips were on the 34-foot Delta. I used a 1.5mm wet suit with a vest. We tried a site that had not been explored. Unfortunately, visibility was bad, but there was still the excitement of exploring new sites besides the tried and true sites that don't see divers more than 10 times a year. This is a great trip for experienced divers due to the huge tidal changes creating strong currents.

UNITED STATES

California

Truth Aquatics, July 2006, Jerry Jensen (jensen_jerry@hotmail.com), Eagle Point, OR. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 65 to 68 F, calm. Overall, conditions were great, though water temp too warm for my drysuit unless I went deep and found the thermocline. We were on the Conception with only 25 divers — nice and uncrowded. The food was great! The bunk area was ok, but I wish the A/C worked; it was hot down there. We were able to dive Farnsworth banks on the west side of Catalina, but only one dive as half the divers were beginners and couldn't go deep (120'). My third time with Truth and each time we motored all night to San Clemente and each time the Navy seals throw us out — a waste of time. We ended the fourth day around the northern islands after motoring all night from Catalina in the worst sea conditions ever; many were sick that night. The next day, our last, it was almost too rough to dive. The captain must get paid by how many hours he puts on the engines — we spent way too much time just driving around in circles and moving from dive

site to dive site. Overall, Truth Aquatics is a great deal.

Truth Aquatics, August 2006, Abe Glazer (aglazer@yahoo.com), Lisle, IL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 58 to 72 F, calm. Truth Aquatics owns three live-aboards that operate out of Santa Barbara. Most of their trips are booked through third party operations (dive shops and travel agents) but you can always find out who is running the trip through their web site. We went on a trip organized by Bill and Kristy Finstad. These boats were designed to be diving boats so the layout is effective though the boat can hold up to 35 divers. Sleeping accommodations are in bunks and can be noisy when the boat is running since you are sleeping next to the engine room. I brought earplugs. There is not a lot of room in the bunks so if you are claustrophobic, you might have some problems. The rest of the boat has plenty of room. We left Santa Barbara about 10 PM and headed down to San Clemente Island, a 100 miles due south. We were there by 6 AM the next day. San Clemente is owned by the US Government and is occasionally off limits to divers and boaters due to live fire exercises. We got a day of diving on the east side of the island (5 dives). Most of the dive sites were near the shore and usually had plenty of relief to them. There was a decent amount of marine life on the kelp and a lot of critters hiding and growing on the rocks. We would see 10-20 lobsters on every dive. We spent two days and nights around Catalina, again on the east side to weather conditions. Diving on the west (ocean side) of these islands is dependent upon how bad the swells are and they were pretty harsh, so the captain avoided taking us to the other side. The giant sea bass are large, docile