

first class, they were knowledgeable, competent and fun. The visibility was slightly less than expected, but the grey reef, black tip, silver tip and white tip sharks were plentiful. A giant hammerhead was spotted deep by some. The diversity was incredible. Whale sharks are rare in Palau, the second captain diving in the waters for 25+ years had never seen one. We saw a baby. About 15' long, it came up from deep, swam with us for 20 minutes and then moved off. This whale shark had been captured, and had a rope around the tail encrusted with barnacles. This was a heartbreaker, and will probably kill it. The diving was structured but the staff was not obtrusive. A great destination and experience. UW Photography Comments: Cameras accommodated well, rinse barrels on the deck when returning from the dive, cameras on nonskid rubber mat on the dive skiff. Large camera table on the dive deck.

Palau Aggressor II, July 2006, Neal Langerman (neal@chemical-safety.com), San Diego, CA. My wife and I have more than 65 years of diving experience between us around the world. Captain Mike Farmer and his crew provide a memorable diving and living experience of the best of Palau outer reef diving. The catamaran Aggressor II is a well-appointed, stable and extremely comfortable home for a week of world-class diving. The large salon and huge galley allow for living comfort that exceeds most land resorts. All diving is from a large, fast skiff. The skiff is secured in a lift cradle across the stern of the Aggressor. Boarding it is as easy as entering the ship's galley. Once all divers are on-board, the skiff is lowered into the water and pulls free of the mother-boat. Each diver's equipment – tank, regulator, fins, mask, etc. – remain on the skiff. Thus, the between

dive chore of managing loose equipment is eliminated. A short run to the dive site and an easy backroll entry drops you into spectacular water. Reef sharks, Napoleon wrasses, eagle rays, and turtles are intermixed with a huge variety of reef fish. The soft corals are beautiful. The walls seem to drop off forever. Most diving is drifting in the current, with three crew members in the water acting as guides. Blue Corner, Blue Holes and New Wall are always close. Ulong Channel, two days before the full moon on the incoming tide was the most exciting drift dive we have ever done. The fast current, the coral and the fish created a kaleidoscope of images diverse images. The same channel two days later was good, but nowhere near the first trip. We did not go to Peleliu because of the weather. According to the crew, the spring and fall are the best times to go south to this island of World War II infamy. Captain Mike was totally involved with his guests and joined the diving activity two or three times a day. He understood what each guest was interested in seeing and worked hard to make each dive an exceptional experience for every diver. His enthusiasm and professionalism were reflected by every member of the crew.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Chertan, November 2005, David McKowen, Andalusia, AL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 80 to 86 F, calm, no currents. I have spent over six months on the Chertan in nine years. I photographed over one hundred different nudibranchs this trip. The crew is well trained, friendly, and knowledgeable. Rob VanDerLoos, the owner/captain,

loves to dive; his enthusiasm adds to everyone's enjoyment of the charter. Diving is usually off the back of the boat, sometimes by dinghy. Macro dives are usually muck dives but seamounts with pelagics and crystal clear water are also visited. Manta Ray station combines mantas with outstanding macro — I shot photos of Coleman's pygmy seahorse here several years ago. There are no restrictions placed on diving, but safety is not compromised, a watch is kept day or night (even for 2 am solo divers), with a dinghy always available. Each tank rack has a tank unless someone is diving — a simple, foolproof method to insure all divers are aboard. Tanks are filled to 2900-3000 via a huge bank with 2 compressors; no waiting for refills. There are 2 rinse tanks for cameras and the crew is well trained. The boat is clean with excellent food but the cabins are small with showers and heads on the main deck. Rob is an avid videographer/photographer, the boat has a large camera table, trained crew, and multiple charging stations (220 and 110). Rob and Mellita have astounding "eyes" — they will dive with you or allow completely unrestricted diving; solo diving is allowed.

Febrina, August 2006, Kevin Feor (FeorDiver@aol.com), Webster, N.Y. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. P.N.G. is 1 to 2 days of travel time. Watch your luggage weight. Traveled with Blue Horizon Dive shop out of Philadelphia, P.A. Nick and Beth put on a spectacular trip and did a fine job with travel arrangements. The weather was warm and the seas relatively calm. The Febrina is an older boat that's well maintained. It is 75 ft. long. The accommodations are not 5-star but the crew and phenomenal diving easily

compensate. The boat holds 18 but was comfortable with 12. Captain Al (owner) is an Aussie who has been in P.N.G. for 20 yrs. and is knowledgeable. He also is a salty dog so the meek and easily offended should stay home. We started muck diving in Rabaul at the pier; lion fish, octopus and lots of small, strange critters. We spent the next 6 days traveling down the coast to Walindi. Along the way we dove walls, some shallow reefs and bommies that are pinnacles. The variety and volume of fish and corals were astounding when compared with the Caribbean. Large schools of barracuda, jacks, bat and bait fish. Also saw a whale, sharks and dolphins. Large dedicated tables and rinse tanks. Adequate charge stations.

Golden Dawn, December 2005, Jim Wick (Jimewick@yahoo.com), Ventura, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. Have been on this boat three times. The water is fantastic, the boat and accommodations comfortable and the food is incomparable. Craig is (I am sure) the most accomplished ocean guide of PNG and the most "common sense" dive master I've known! His life, profession and love of the ocean fit him like a glove! The crew is top shelf and always smiling. The reefs are colorful and full of life. From pygmy seahorses to sharks and soft/hard corals to giant sea fans, the underwater world of PNG is a veritable cornucopia of colors and textures. Some swinging or swaying with the ocean surges and others holding firm against strong, driving currents. From nearly still waters to super strong currents blowing you wildly across reef tops (as you tumble over and around almost uncontrollably) you will experience many different diving

conditions. The crew's sincere caring and desire to make your trip as good as it can be compelling.

Golden Dawn, February 2006, Nick Southall (nls1@bellsouth.net), Mobile, AL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Unspoiled diving at its best. Pristine coral, tons of fish.

Golden Dawn, May 2006, Janet Leymeister and Dave Marchese (jleydmar@copper.net), Hummelstown, PA. Our 10th Live-aboard trip. Our cabin (1) had a double bed, a bunk, and private bath, a small closet but no drawers. We used the bunk as a storage shelf. Some cabins were quite small and had shared baths. Anyone over six feet tall would likely feel cramped on this boat. The ship was full with ten guests. The stern is rather small. Only about six could gear up comfortably at a time, so a few would just hang back a couple minutes. The lack of a rear dive platform required giant stride entries from a starboard platform midship. The process involved gearing up at the stern, queuing up to the platform, and giant striding into the water one at a time. Current was typically nonexistent and seas were flat. The food was heavy on the red meat (both lunch and dinner), but it was about the best we've had on a live-aboard. We started our trip in Kimbe Bay at the Walindi Resort and ended at Rabaul. We spent more than 44 hours under water. Unfortunately, the diving was simply not world class. Not one of our 43 dives was spectacular. I'd rank about a dozen as really good, but 2 or 3 as some of the worst I've done in many years (horrible vis, few fish, dead reef). The best visibility was about 75'. About half were in the 50' range, some in the 25' range, and on a couple it was about

15'. And those were reef dives (not muck dives). All the dives in Kimbe Bay were on pinnacles. Most were rather deep. We dove nitrox to gain bottom time. At Father's and near Rabaul we did some walls. The fish population was surprisingly low and some reefs were largely dead. We never once encountered the big bait balls or the clouds of fish that we expected. On about half the dives we saw "a lot of fish" but on others, the reefs just looked abandoned or fished out. On a couple of sites, the population seemed sparser than what is common in the Caribbean. There was also a profound lack of anything big, though we an average of one hawksbill per dive. When the dive master would do his rub-on-the-water-bottle shark call, a few sharks (white tips, silver tips, grey reef, and black tips) would usually come in for a quick look and then would be gone in a few seconds; the sharks were generally reluctant to get shallower than 100'. On one dive we had a pretty good shark encounter with about a dozen including a 10' silver tip. Unfortunately, the vis was in the 40' range. Four of us after a dive hung onto the side of the skiff as it motored along and the dolphins played off the bow under our noses. During the fun, I looked back and, to my shock, saw my fin in the prop! If you get a chance to see dolphins this way, be careful! We did see a lot, but considering the expense, the distance, and the reputation, we really feel cheated. Perhaps everything was due to abnormal water temperatures. On most dives, the water was 86F. Even at 100' it was 84F. Our only ray encounter was a lone eagle ray that shot by at the limits of visibility.

Golden Dawn, Dolphin Enterprises, July 2006, Julia DeMartini, Kaneohe, HI. (hiredwolf@aol.com) Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 150 Feet.

Water: 82 to 85 F, calm, surge. Wonderful parts: Great group of 7 guest divers, all but one was repeat. Everyone got along well, was helpful, and the meals were full of good cheer and laughter. The De Wit brothers, Craig and Adrian, are the tops in leading dives and knowledge of the sites. Both would 'rub the bottle' to gather sharks of many kinds. We wanted some muck diving and were given the opportunity to find our own critters at new sites. They would show us 'weird' nudibranchs, etc., at their known sites. Always some exploratory dives on the Golden Dawn — part of the excitement. Large area of the Western Bismarck sea is covered, and Craig took us to the best possible sites. But the overnight crossings could be rough and bouncy, thus, sleep loss. Some sites appeared to have been poached by Asian fishermen. Papua New Guinea does not have the resources to police these activities. But we were able to see many good size sharks, rays and other pelagics, as well as nervous big groupers, including huge Queensland groupers. Craig works hard to rally local villagers to help in policing the area. We have done live-aboards in six different regions of PNG, and plan to return. The boat captain, who is also the proprietor on board, makes a world of difference in these adventures.

Star Dancer, February 2006, Donald Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net), Glendora, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 84 F, calm. I was impressed with both the variety and number of small critters we saw. On the first dive . . . sea snakes, cleaner shrimp, filefish, baby lion fish, cushion starfish, squat lobster, frogfish, nudibranchs, banded pipefish, anglerfish, stony toadfish, and pufferfish. More seahorses on the next dive than I had seen cumulatively in all my other

dives. The dive guides (all native) were uncanny in their ability to find these critters, such as mantis shrimp that had to patiently be coaxed out of their holes. Another dive: frogfish, snake banner eel, juvenile squat lobster, angel fish, octopus, banded shrimp, crocodile scorpion fish, decorated shrimp, electric clam, flying gurnard. And Mandarin fish on one night dive. Visibility was good but not outstanding. Water was almost too warm. Skies were mostly cloudy with showers from time to time but weather never caused any dive interruption. Rooms are typical Peter Hughes with lots of room and ensuite toilet and shower. Diving was on the East side of PNG because West side was enjoying the monsoon season. Crew was friendly and helpful with typical Peter Hughes service. We had a few mishaps that disturbed many divers. First, the skiff went down for motor ills the second day and never came back. This meant that we either had to come back to the main boat, or when there was current, we had to be picked up by the Stardancer. Alan, the skipper did a fine job of this but it was an ordeal. Often we tied up to either the shore or a dive site and the tie line broke while we were underwater causing another pickup by the Stardancer. This was the last dive trip before the boat was to go to dry-dock for refurbishing which meant it wasn't in "shiny penny" condition and wasn't well stocked with varieties of food. Without a skiff, fishing was not productive so that added to the lack of variety in the diet that also disturbed some of the passengers who, were veteran divers with many live-aboard trips. We did get lots of dives. I had to forego one day of diving due to the flight schedule provided by my travel agent that I didn't read carefully enough before

traveling, but still got 35 dives in 9 days and 29 hours of bottom time. I sure did miss the pelagics however.

Star Dancer, April 2006, Terry Gee, El Paso, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 55 to 120 Feet. Water: 86 to 90 F, calm. The Star Dancer is spacious with relatively large rooms and lavatories in each, a spacious dive deck and dive platform, a comfortable lounge/dining room, a nice library/theatre/boutique and a large sun deck with ample shade, sun and hammocks and lounge furniture. The crew is warm, accommodating, friendly and interacts with the guests in a most pleasant manner. Captain Raabe is a delight and extremely entertaining. The diving is of spectacular with five dives a day, no profiles or time limits, dive masters in the water to point out critters (which is a great help as so many of them are so small) and new dive sites with almost every dive. Divers were accounted for by each having a name tag attached to them before each dive and retrieved by the crew upon exiting the water. Camera facilities included a clean and spacious dedicated rinse tank, a dedicated camera table and work space and a charging station for batteries. It seems like I am the only dinosaur using conventional photography these days as the digital wave sweeps over the rest of the dive community, so the onboard development of slides is no longer up and running. Cameras were carried to the dive deck by the crew and passed to the divers in the water. Care in handling the equipment was always exercised.

Star Dancer, June 2006, Jonathan Bank (jonbank@mac.com), Bethesda, MD. Experience: 150 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm and flat. Great crew, great sharks, great muck diving.

Star Dancer, July 2006, Lori Brown, Chris Green (DoctorSLB2001@yahoo.com), Bellevue, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 77 to 80 F. We boarded the Star Dancer in Rabaul, on the northeastern tip of New Britain and is a few hours' flight from Port Moresby. This was our first live-aboard — we had been saving the trip for when we felt our 14-year-old son was old enough to enjoy the trip. Our first dive was on the Atun boat wreck. This was a fishing boat that was intentionally sunk for divers. The boat was a good dive and large enough that it was possible to spread out enough on the boat to avoid other divers. At the Valley there were numerous sea fans and sea whips. Several divers spotted a shark in the distance. The last dive of the day was a muck dive at Alan's Place. But, before the dive, there was a little excitement as one of the locals had been out spearfishing and had been pulled out to sea by the undertow. One of the crew took off in the tender boat to look for the lost fisherman and the Star Dancer chugged around looking for him. It was a bit tense. I selfishly feared seeing a body bobbing up and down in the water. But the fisherman managed to get to land and walked back to town. During the dive that night, we saw many shrimp/goby pairs, coris wrasse, crinoid shrimp, and many nudibranchs. Our dive at Middle Reef was exciting because of a blue ring octopus that was waiting for us on the mooring. By the 4th day of diving, they started chumming for sharks — some of the divers were disappointed because we hadn't really seen any big fish. But the chumming didn't attract any sharks, nor did we see any for the remainder of the trip. One of the best dives of the trip was a muck dive — Linguan. We saw many pipefish, an anemone that went

on and on with a wide variety of anemone fish, crabs, shrimp. A contender for the best dive of the trip was the jetty in Rabaul. There were cockatoo wasp fish, lion fish, a boiling mass of catfish, flounder, and frog fish. A moray eel swam up into one of the dive guide's (Josie's) BC and swam out the arm hole. She panicked and flailed around but didn't bolt to the surface. There were local kids freediving from the surface and yanking at our equipment. It was good-natured but a bit annoying. Accommodations were excellent and the food, though a bit plain, was good. However, overall, we were disappointed by the itinerary that we picked. We traveled from Rabaul west to the northwest tip of New Britain and back. The diving (compared with other locations in PNG) was a bit disappointing. I had a preconceived expectation that there would be camaraderie among the divers, but this just didn't develop. Instead, there was a group of 5 buddies who had been in a dive club together and had also dived with the Captain and other senior crew. As a result, there was kind of clique thing going and it was like being stuck on a boat with mean girls — if you know what I mean. Ironically, the saving grace of this leg of our dive journey in PNG was the land attractions. The volcano, Tavurvur, was pumping plumes of ash every half hour or so. The view was spectacular as the heavy ash could be seen to be sifting out of the plume to earth as strong winds carried away long continuous streams of steam. We also went on a land tour of Rabaul that included a visit to Admiral Yamamoto's bunker and tunnels built (with slave labor) for living quarters for soldiers and to accommodate barges brought in to supply the Japanese during WWII. We

visited a hot spring pouring into the bay. The truck became stuck several times in the deep ash from the recent volcanic activity.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Bilikiki, October 2005, Bob and Gayle Bringas (robertbringas@email.msn.com), Gasto, OR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. Rooms were spacious. Corals healthy. Lots of lionfish (a personal favorite.) Lots of large schools of large fish. Not much in the way of pelagics, but lots of the usual tropicals and macro stuff. Some interesting and unusual dives: a few wrecks, passage dives for sharks, caves, and Mirror Pond, where you surface in an inland pond in the jungle. Most diving from 'tinnies', metal skiffs with small, but adequate, boarding ladders. Dive masters personable, helpful if you needed it; left you alone if you didn't. Crew attentive and helpful. This is the only live-aboard we've been on where the crew cleaned your gear at the end of the week! If it didn't get dry, they took it down to the engine room overnight. Laundry services offered midweek.

Bilikiki, November 2005, Michael Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, no currents. Although it was billed as the center of biodiversity, we didn't see as many different types of fish as we expected. It may have been that we were on a trip with photographers who were especially interested in wide angle shots more than little critters. However, the staff was great (incredible dive organization and wonderful cruise directors). Many days you could dive whenever