

couldn't start so divers were waiting for almost an hour for a pick up after a dive). Accordingly, our experience with Philippine Island Divers was completely professional. They were able to supply Nitrox (even found a leak in the seal of the tank before a dive and were able to get another tank within 15 minutes); the divemasters were interested in showing nudis, cleaner shrimp and other special items without being cloying and the support organization was great. Our hotel was away from the beach and was quite pleasant. It had a great pool and each room was a mini-apartment with a complete kitchen and balcony. Stop at the supermarket before you leave the city you fly into for provisions, as there are only small shops by Alona Beach. There are some good restaurants (especially an Italian restaurant on the road to the beach) and other features to make this a nice destination. Manila is not the easiest airport to find food (at any hour) and expect to go through security about 10,000 times. Luggage and customs is also strange ... but the people are great and the country is beautiful! UW Photography Comments: The operation is not particularly set up for UWP, as most divers are not as experienced. No facilities on board the boats and on shore facilities have camera wash with regulators.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

While difficult to get to, the Solomons are classic jungle islands with beautiful reefs and excellent fish life.

Dive Gizo, Gizo Hotel, August 2006, Dee (deemickey@mindspring.com), Madison, AL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. We spent a day in

Brisbane, then took Solomon Air to Honiara and on to Gizo. The flights offer fantastic views of islands, reefs and sea. The Solomons exist in a different time and we benefitted from reading Ples Blong Iumii, local history written by Solomon Islanders. (Guadalcanal was in the Honiara area. Kennedy Island, where JFK and PT109 crew survived, is a surface interval near Gizo.) Allen and Rueben, Dive Gizo divemasters, met us at the Gizo airport and carried our bags to the boat for the short trip to town. The Gizo Hotel remains clean and simple, lovely courtyard around the pool, A/C and fridge, no TV. We had a great view across the main street (sand) to the water. The restaurant is good. Take your own coffee press if you don't want instant. No bugs or mosquitoes, just a few gnats at the bath sink. Danny and Kerrie at Dive Gizo are wonderful hosts! They've been there for 18 years and will do all they can to accommodate you. We scheduled 3 dives a day for 5 days. All surface intervals are on out-islands with beautiful beaches. Lunch and snacks provided. Little current and more fish than one could imagine. We did Grand Central Station twice. Jenny at Reef and Rainforest, who arranged our trip, noted Grand Central is one of the best dives she's ever done. We sat at 90 meters at the edge of the wall and watched schools and schools of fish. The school of barracuda covered 150 degrees of our 360 degree view, at least 8 fish deep.. The rest of the panorama was schools of fusiliers, trevally, batfish and others. The Tao Maru is great even if you're not into wrecks, home to a wide variety of fish, critters and corals with many relics of the boat cargo, including a 2-person Japanese tank. Almost every dive started with 30 meters and finished at 10 meters or less,

allowing plenty of time to off-gas. We were free to explore the shallows until air at 500 psi, so every dive was over an hour. The dive sites are 10 to 30 minutes away, and the scenery is enchanting. We did several dives near Naru Island and the coral was spectacular. Danny's led efforts to set aside marine preserve areas so sites are pristine. There's an old live-aboard sunk just off Danny's jetty that's well worth the shore dive. Water is murky, but there's a friendly school of batfish, at least 3 lionfish, many pipefish, anemone and clownfish. We went on to Uepi resort is on its own island, which Grant and Jill Kelly have developed over the past 20 years. They generate their own power, all water is rainwater. The grounds are beautiful, with lots of orchids and hibiscus. Our private bungalow with covered patio was right on the beach. Lunch was brought to the bungalow, so mid-day surface interval was most relaxing. The island sits with the Coral Sea to the north and the Morova Lagoon on the other sides, a 30 minute boat ride from the airport. The channel just off the jetties is a great wall that's your house dive or snorkel. The sharks are friendly and provide great photo ops. Billy Ghizo was a particularly pleasant dive — wall off an adjacent island with lots to see at all depths, including a pygmy seahorse, baby batfish, nudis, sea slugs, lionfish and the biggest eel I've ever seen hiding in the rocks. There are plenty of dive sites, including wrecks, within a 30 minute boat ride. Again sites are pristine. There may be some local fishing, but no one else is diving the area, just the 20 guests at Uepi. We didn't encounter any other Americans on this trip, and we truly enjoyed meeting Australian divers. (As with any remote destination, it's thoughtful to

email ahead and see if there's anything you can bring for your hosts.)

TONGA

Beluga Dive Co., Dolphin Pacific Diving, Tongan Beach Resort, September 2005, Pat Bridges (divergal@hotmail.com), Nashville, TN. Experience: 350+ dives. Water: 76 to 77 F, calm and flat, surge. Diving around the islands of the Vava'u chain in Tonga is a guaranteed adventure. Spectacular! At least three varieties of lionfish, five varieties of sea cucumbers (on one dive!), fire dartfish, salp, wire-net filefish, South Seas devils, humbugs, black-saddled toby, and 92 other species that I could identify in the fish field guides; scores more that I couldn't key out. There are lovely corals and forests of sea fans. "Chinatown" has a field of red carpet anemones swarming with multiple varieties of anemonefish. September was whale season; spotting humpback whales and calves was a daily occurrence. Once the divemaster cupped his hand to his ear and pointed to "the deep," hearing whale singing. Tonga is populated by friendly people who have learned a smattering of English. Also, a fair number of Aussie and Kiwi ex-pats. Dolphin Pacific Diving is a no-frills company with a new (six weeks) owner who has a lot of energy but not much materiel to work with. Their primary boat, Philia, is a converted fishing boat ... not converted enough. No drinking water or camera bucket aboard. Entry is a giant stride completed after teetering on a too-small triangular platform atop the gunwales. Their post-dive drill is: hand up weightbelt and BC, keep fins on and climb up a Christmas-tree ladder with no railing to hang onto. The DMs and deckhands are doing the best they can