

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

you wanted to by jumping off the end of the boat, and by the time you dried off when you were back on board, the staff already had your tank filled! The boat could stand better sound proofing between rooms, a/c controls, other amenities in the rooms and with more than 14 photographers it got crowded in the salon and the camera room. However, everyone was congenial, dives were interesting and logistics were fine. If you fly through Fiji on Air Pacific, it's a viable alternative but sometimes the flights get cancelled. There's one good hotel in Honiara and not much to see on land there; however, the local carving is fantastic and we had the chance to go to several villages.

**Bilikiki, December 2005, Charles Hecht (cjhecht@aol.com), New York, NY.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, currents, no currents. UW Photography Comments: The Bilikiki is an old converted freighter, but the accommodations are more than adequate, the staff is excellent and the diversity of diving and health of the reefs cannot be beat. 3 leaf scorpion fish, schools of Mandarin gobies, schools of razorfish, blue ringed octopus, cuttle fish, frogfish, etc. The dives give me ideas for my sculptures about life in the sea. There were many small reef sharks as the Solomons are recovering from letting the Chinese catch sharks for shark fin soup. The reefs were pristine.

**Bilikiki, June 2006, Brian Morrow, Roswell, GA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 86 to 87 F, calm, currents. The weather for our 12 night trip was mostly cloudy. The Bilikiki is an outstanding operation with a long tenured and talented crew. We came back spoiled rotten from the service. Diving is mainly done off

"tinnies" which take you right to the reef and the tinnie drivers come and get you wherever you surface. The numbers and types of fish are incredible and the variety of dive sites, wrecks, walls, slopes, channels are great. The food is plentiful and good. The chocolate chip cookies brought out the "Cookie Monster" in many of us. Fresh fish and fruits and vegetables are purchased from the local villagers who visit by canoe. The cabins are the largest we have seen on a live-aboard and the air conditioning worked well. The ship is kept in good repair. We flew to LA and had a 3-hour layover, then 14 hours to Brisbane, overnighted, then took the flight to Honiara the next morning. We were greeted by the Bilikiki staff and taken to a hotel lobby to wait an hour or two and then taken to the boat to board. On the return trip you depart the boat first thing in the morning and then have to kill six or seven hours before the flight to Australia leaves. Going back via Fiji saves a few hours because the plane leaves two or three hours earlier. We went to Brisbane and Sydney for a couple of extra days. Not cheap to get there but worth the trip.

**Bilikiki, July 2006, Dee Foster, Newport Beach, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, currents. Super-macro photo ops. Think multiple diopters, think tiny, tiny, beyond tiny. If you're a little older, like us, and don't have state of the art camera equipment, like us, and your eyesight is less than 20/20, like us, you may just be pointing your camera in the general direction of where you think the critter is, and hoping it shows up on the print. That's what we did, several times, and got some good shots and some bragging rights with our local dive buddies. The boat is a heavy old fishing boat, and handles the open

water crossings in smooth fashion. Crossings from one island group to the next (always at night) were pretty comfortable. Food was plentiful and palatable, lots of fresh produce that they buy almost daily from the local islanders, who paddle it out in their dugout canoes. Michelle was careful to buy something from everyone, rather than buying all of one person's crop. This helps the local economy, and of course, it encourages locals to keep growing things for the Bilikiki. Lunches and dinners usually featured beef and chicken, or fish and chicken. Special diet requests were always accommodated. Great coral, no bleaching, lots of tropicals. The diversity of fish life is astonishing. It's like you get three kinds of fairy basslets, greenbird, sunset, banana wrasses, parrot fish, some trevallies, an emperor angel, a blue-faced angel, a bunch of different damsels, porcelain crabs, and ten different nudibranchs, all on one dive. Breakfasts could use variety. It was a couple of cereals, and scrambled eggs almost every day — even just some cheese on top of the eggs would have been a welcome change. With eleven crew members, three of them full-time cooks, it seems an easy thing to fix. They charge you for every soft drink, nickel and diming, as they are one of the most expensive dive boats out there. Cabins, though spacious, have no porthole, making them dark. I missed a window, but there's no easy fix for that. The boat requires a good deal of agility to get around. There's a nonstandard drop of about 10 inches coming out of the cabins into the main passageway that caused more than one smashed toe. There are watertight doors that require you to step over about a 16 inch high lip, and the stairs down to the cabins are steep. None of this is a big

deal to a person with normal agility, but if you had reduced mobility (like bad arthritis), it could be a challenge. The average dive day started at 6:30 am with breakfast. First dive, like most, was from the heavy duty inflatable dive tender. They're well designed, with sturdy holes for tanks to sit in. Nice big outboards that seemed quite new, never let us down. Rarely more than a five minute ride, everyone got ready at once and backrolled out on the count of three. To get out, most people handed up all their gear to the boat driver and then climbed up the smallish ladder. A few gung-ho people climbed up fully geared, but I'm getting a little old for that kind of bravado. On a few dive sites, we just jumped off the back of the boat, coming and going as we pleased, but most dives were done off the inflatables (there are two) at 7:30, 10:30, 2:30 and 5:00. Lunch was noon-ish, and dinner around 6:30. Night dives were offered nearly every night after dinner. We did one, but didn't think it was that exciting, opting instead to have wine with dinner. The crew, 11 Solomon Islanders, were incredibly polite and hard working, but mostly shy. The Aussie managers, Michelle and Monty, were great guys, always up for a joke, but always aware of what was going on and keeping things running smoothly. Their desalinators were both on the blink, forcing them to buy fresh water from the local islands, without limiting of safe, cold water available for drinking. I did get a little bug, but it cleared up in a day when I started my travelers' diarrhea antibiotics. Absolutely plan to bring home carvings, although packing it to go home was rough. The Solomon Islanders are incredible carvers! We were on a Stan Waterman trip, so all 14 divers were loaded down. Huge rigs

with housings and lights all fit comfortably on dedicated indoor and outdoor photo tables. Two photo rinse tanks were filled with clean water daily, though the desalinators were not running. I even saw the crew scrub out the photo tanks with brushes and soap mid-trip. Their charging room and workroom would make some dive boat operators cry with envy. Long clean benches with tons of charging stations, plenty of room for everyone, lots of tools for fixing broken cameras and scuba rigs. Really, you should think micro, not macro. Michelle, the dive guide and boat manager (along with her husband Manny), could find things that were no bigger than 1/16 to 1/8 inch perfectly camouflaged on their host coral or anemone. Things like teeny tiny shrimp, almost impossible to see with the naked eye if you're over 40!

**Bilikiki, July 2006, John Crossley (jcrossle@csufresno.edu), Fresno, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. I've been on 25 live-aboard dive boats, but the Bilikiki is certainly one of the top two I've been on, and probably the best managed. Everything was a smooth operation including the airport to boat transfers and baggage handling. Maybe the only glitch was the slow food service at the local hotel as we waited to board and again while we waited to depart. The cabins are spacious and the dive deck is probably the best in the business. Our group of 14 divers was a Stan Waterman-led group so we all had one or two cameras or video cameras. There were a few too many big camera rigs for the camera table on the dive deck, but there was lots of room in the salon where most people set up their laptops for their digital editing. There is also a separate room with charging stations and camera tools. Boat crew were excellent in handling camera

equipment and were careful placing cameras in the two large rinse tanks. Food was excellent, with several choices each meal and always fresh salads and veggies. Between-dive snacks like chocolate chip cookies added to our weight gains. The chef was great about preparing special dishes for anyone with a dietary limitation. The diving was an excellent combination of hard and soft corals, macro critters, and some pelagics. We didn't see many sharks. The dive masters knew the sites well, advising us what lens to bring to photo the sites that were likely to have the schooling barracudas or the pygmy seahorses. We had visits to three local villages to buy excellent wood carvings that were good values. It was also fun to interact with the villagers who paddled their canoes up to the Bilikiki to sell fruit, fish, crafts, or to chat. Stan Waterman led the nightly entertainment with his videos of dive adventures around the world accompanied by grand tales from this master storyteller. Stan made about three dives each day and gave advice about video techniques. Water temperatures in July allowed us to dive in a lycra skin or a 3 mil at most. Visibility ranged from about 40 feet to at least 150 at a couple locations.

**Spirit of Solomons, November 2005, Peter J Maerz (pjmaerz@yahoo.com), Hollywood, FL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. Dive deck: Just behind the bow, the covered dive staging area is quite roomy. Salon: Just aft, through a hatch, is the salon with two large, rubber coated tables, two extensive charging stations (120 and 240 volts) and walls lined with reference books. They offered each diver a plastic basket in which to keep camera/battery/computer supplies. At the rear of the boat's middle deck is a large, covered dining area with tables

for 6, each outfitted with plastic stack chairs. The open sides are fitted with roll-down plastic sheets for inclement or windy weather. This is a delightful area for eating or just hanging out and reading. It featured two hammocks for snoozing at the stern. Excellent, varied and abundant food served buffet style. Cabins: Mine was one of the four single-occupancy cabins, below decks all the way forward. It was tiny, right in the bow, but with adequate storage space and a sink. The 4 single cabins share two toilets and 3 showers. Dive procedure: Schedule: 7:00am-breakfast, 8:00am-Dive 1, 11:00am-Dive 2, 12:30pm lunch, 2:00pm-dive 3, 5:00pm-dive 4, 7:00pm Dinner, 8:30 or later-night dive. Nitrox users need to analyze their tank before each dive and record the information, along with max depth after the dive. No restrictions on diving. A board with two rows of hooks, one for "on board" and the other row for "diving" holds tags with each diver's name and tank number. An extensive, detailed chalkboard briefing is offered before each dive, with every conceivable contingency accounted for and detailed notes on what to find and where to find it. Divers' gear carried to "tinnies" (sturdy aluminum dinghies). Divers' cameras carefully carried on board. Once underway, one of the divemasters helps each diver into her/his gear. Divers backroll in unison. Two tinnies are always in the water, with one hovering about the dive site available within seconds when divers surface. Fins are handed up, but not gear (unless so desired). The ladder is a bit challenging, with no substantial handhold topside on the right side, but the learning curve is shallow. Divers are helped to their seats and their tanks slotted in the benches for the ride back to the boat, where divers exit, leaving

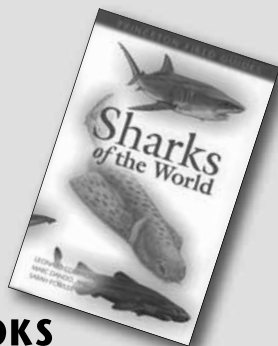
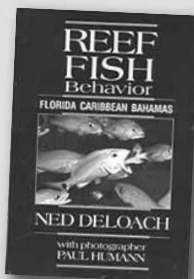
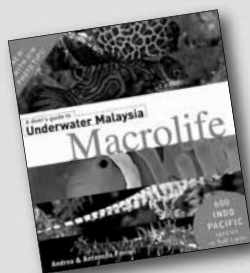
the crew to haul the gear back on board the spirit and fill tanks for the next dive. Grant and Sonia, boat managers and dive masters are a wonder. In most cases, both dive every dive, finding lots of goodies and video-taping the dive. They have a great camaraderie with the rest of the crew and treat them as equals. I was blown away by the amazing abundance, diversity and health of both hard and soft. There were often huge fields of coral, every inch packed with healthy polyps, stretching away as far as the eye could see. Sea fans the size of garage doors. I noticed next to no bleaching. Fish life was equally stunning. It was common to come across a veritable river of fish, say 1,000 yellow tails, flowing past for minutes on end. Tornadoes of chevron barracuda. Cumulus clouds of anthias in every color. Bait fish balls descending like fog. Moorish idols, surgeon fish and all manner of butterfly fish constantly cruising by in pairs or groups. Pyramid butterflies by the dozens along the walls. Countless anemones of all types with their attendant clown fish. Many encounters with dreamily hovering lionfish, often in pairs, once in a group of five! We found one baby lionfish with a body the side of a lima bean! Bumphead ballets with dozens of the lumbering giants expelling huge clouds of fish poop. I had an amazing encounter with a "small" (15-20 foot) whale shark, apparently only the second spotted in years in the area. A manta ray made a flyby on one dive. White tip, grey, and black tip sharks made numerous appearances. Three crocodile fish sightings, one jet black! A robust pipe fish (I still swear it was a leaf!) showed up. Scores of nudibranchs in a dozen or more varieties, including doormat size. Lots of gobies guarding their shrimp companion's work. Blennies of all types. Hawkfish, banded

pipefish, pajama cardinalfish, razorfish, pygmy seahorses. Night dives featured slipper lobsters, hermit crabs, decorator crabs, regular crabs and the evil but strangely beautiful crowns-of-thorns. Reef structures ranged from sheer walls (often at the perimeter of islands) to pinnacles to gently sloping. The famous Leru Cut is a huge split in the rock that affords breathtaking lighting with shafts of sunlight piercing the depths and an opportunity to surface in the midst of the jungle. Another dive, Mirror Pond, also offers a forest surfacing and the chance to get a great over/under photo (or up to the canopy from below the surface as I got). There were some beach dives and a couple of wrecks. There was not one "dud" among the 56 dives and some, especially in the Morovo Lagoon, I'll never forget. Village visits are a treat with wood carvings and interaction with generally shy, gentle, welcoming villagers. Most of the nights were spent anchored in quiet or flat calm lagoons. We'd wake up to spectacular island scenery. Only

four lengthy steams, those out and back between island groups and only one of those somewhat rough. If you're in the bow as I was, you may find it difficult to sleep in rough seas and if you're prone to mal de mer you'll want to bring the Bonine! UW Photography Comments: Large, two-tiered, sheltered Camera staging table on dive deck. Two large, rubber coated tables for more extensive camera work in salon.

## TONGA

**Nai'a, August 2006, Ron Dion** ([rondion1@juno.com](mailto:rondion1@juno.com)), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy. This is one of the best boats out there, but we were tossed up on a remote reef in a storm at 3am and had to abandon ship. We spent 12 hours on a desert island and were rescued by a passing Kiwi sailor. The Nai'a did all she could to help but it was a bad time for all.



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