

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

with what they have to work with, although a fella who was with us on an Intro to Diving experience was taken to 50 feet with the rest of us and suffered bloodshot eyes the next day from mask squeeze. All this for US\$75 for a two-tank dive including all gear (a hodge-podge of hard-used equipment). Or, spend US\$85 at Belluga Divers and you get two tanks, all gear including a computer, and much more comfortable facilities aboard. Same great dive sites, but we were treated to cookies, fresh fruit and coffee between dives. A real pro outfit. I say this even after, through a bit of miscommunication, the dive boat neglected to stop at the Tongan Beach dock to pick me up on their way out one morning. My phone call to the shop resulted in their sending a runabout to ferry me to the dive site. A DM took me in one-on-one for the first dive and then I went in with the others after a decent surface interval. I rate this area right up there with Red Sea diving. Too bad it's 32 hours away from home!

Happy Ha'apai Divers, Sandy Beach Resort, September 2006, Bill Hollister, Petaluma, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy. People go to Tonga to snorkel with humpback whales. There are two main island groups where you are likely to be able to snorkel with the whales: Vava'u and Ha'apai. The Vava'u group has most of the whales, and visitors are much more likely to be able to get into the water with them. But we went to the Ha'apai group — to the Sandy Beach Resort on the island of Foa — because it is reputed to have the best beach in Tonga (our info was that the beaches in the Vava'u group were not good), and shelling and long walks on the beach are an important part of my wife's focus. We spent two weeks. The dive operation is on their property,

although it is an independent operation. The diving is not as good as I have experienced in other Pacific locations: much fewer fish (variety and number), healthy coral, and critters. Two locations were good (Seven Sisters and Akouty), the rest uninteresting. One notable item for photographers is that on these two sites the anthias, fusiliers, wrasse, and butterflies allowed me to get within 1-2 feet of them and literally posing for me. The dive operation is OK, but suffers from serious lack of communication. Several times we expected a normal 4-hour, 2-dive morning on the dive boat, but instead went on an all-day combined dive and whale watch on the catamaran. Not really complaining, but no one bothered telling us. Not customer-centered, although they will allow you to do your own diving once you demonstrate competency. The resort is fine, basic but comfortable cottages on the beach, good food (not much variety). The German owners are willing to help. The beaches (there is another uninhabited small island a 10-15 minute kayak trip away with a nice beach) are nice, and we did get some good shells. For just diving, go to Fiji or other Pacific locations.

CENTRAL AND WESTERN LIVEBOARDS

AUSTRALIA

Explorer Ventures, January 2006, Michael Mould, Lake Park, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. After diving Caribbean only, GBR was magnificent. Bommies make easy diving starting at 100 ft. or so and then