

current. Like diving in an aquarium. Thousands upon thousands of reef fish. Big schools of pyramid butterflies, great barracuda, school of smaller barracuda, big green moray in hole, and a wealth of undamaged coral. 5 May —Bora Bora. Viz 40-70, water 84, modest current. Not like it was when I was there in 1973. Big over-the-water hotels everywhere, even traffic in town of Vaitape. Quel horror jet skis allowed in the lagoon. But sharks are fed regularly just outside and south of the main pass into the lagoon, so dozens of friendly grays, half a dozen big lemons, a turtle, white-mouthed moray, schools of jacks and many other large fish in addition to the usual tropicals. The islands still beautiful and the diving still good, but the ambiance 7 May — Atiu island, Cook islands. Viz 60-100, water 84. Few fish must be a lot of local fishing. Coloring-changing octopus, spotted brown and orange boxfish. Island itself is wonderful and people are friendly. Atiu is a low makatea island, so there are some beautiful little beaches and a sunken fringing reef. Not a hotspot for diving, but you can see the unique endemic kopeka bird, which lives in a cave and hunts by echo location. Manuae island. Uninhabited Cook islands atoll. Abandoned copra plantation. Viz unlimited. Spectacular plate coral, some crown-of-thorns around. Few pelagics, but tons of blue fusiliers and small reef fish, and magnificent visibility all the way down to the blue depths. Palmerston island, Central Cook islands. Viz unlimited, water 84. Really the middle of nowhere. All of the islands (current) 52 inhabitants are descendents of planter William Marsters and his three Polynesian wives. Local community hospitable. Island streets fashioned of white sand are neat as can be. Visitors

can view the cemetery and the grave of patriarch William Marsters. 1st dive: Never seen so much healthy, big brain coral. Delicate staghorn in all colors. Friendly juvenile gray reef sharks and a couple of whitetips together with the usual plethora of reef fish. 2nd dive: An amazing entry. Head from lagoon down a narrow (one diver at a time, single file) sloping, winding canyon that without warning opens onto a sheer drop-off into bottomless blue. Two big Napoleon wrasses show up to serve as escorts. Huge green turtles. Clouds of blue fusiliers, parrotfish making sand everywhere, dark pufferfish, exquisite delicate boxfish, and the kind of diving that harkens back to the early days.

## AUSTRALIA

### **Nimrod Explorer, June 2007, Fiona Rattray, Elora, On.** Experience:

251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. I chose Nimrod Explorer due to reports in Undercurrent.. The office in Cairns was helpful, both in booking and answering questions. I stayed at the Fig Tree Inn in Cairns before and after the trip. The Nimrod is a catamaran that can take 18 passengers. there were 12: 11 divers and a snorkeler (partner of one of the divers). All divers were experienced, some with 30 years of diving under their belts. What you see on the website is what you get in real life. I got a cabin to myself on the upper deck. My room had its own head and shower. The A/C was a bit cold in my room, but the crew did adjust it. Electrical outlets had Australian-style plugs; bring an adapter. Up to five dives a day including night dives; 16 were available. I chose the Cairns to Cooktown, 4 nights, 5 days trip. The boat

goes out to the reef overnight, works its way up the reef to the Cod Hole, then back down to Cooktown. You get a cool low-level flight back over the reef and the Daintree rainforest to return you to Cairns. There were 7 crew: captain, engineer, chef (AnneMarie), apprentice cook, housekeeper and two dive masters (Kelly and Dan). Two double topside cabins, and the rest are quads located in the two catamaran hulls, the usual unique catamaran geometry. The "saloon," where dive briefings were held and food was served, also had a video for movies and a small library. There was a front area for sunning, but the weather was unusually cloudy: sunny only on the last day. The dive deck was spacious, and entry usually off the platform at the back, although side entries could be made if conditions warranted. A hang bar at 10 feet was in place on all dives, though it could float up in a current. The food was amazing. AnneMarie had studied nutrition for athletes, and chose foods that were more easily digested for divers (i.e., less grease). She had fresh herbs, locally grown meats and fish, and veggies/fruit. You helped yourself. A small breakfast was offered before the early morning dive, then a "real" breakfast (eggs, fruit, toast, etc.). Lunch was salads, sandwiches, etc. Dinner included fish, chicken, beef, stir fries, curries, and on the last night, barbecued ribs. Snacks were available between dives, tea, coffee, juice, soft drinks always on hand. Hot muffins, brownies after night dives (plus hot towels!). You got a new spring water bottle and put your name on it on the first day, then refilled it (reduced plastic waste: good idea). Beer and wine available, if you had paid in US\$, alcohol was free. First alcoholic drink, last dive of the day. Divemaster Kelly provided good drawings of the dive

sites, and had great information on critters. She and Dan alternated dives. One would be available for the chase boat if needed, the other led the dives. You could dive with your buddy on your own, or follow the divemaster. Training was available in everything from AOW to solo diving; availability depended on if the divemasters on board could teach the course. Solo diving permitted with solo card on most but not all dives (due to current and other conditions). Each diver was given a dive flag on a collapsible pole that went on your tank. One quick snap and the shockcord locked the pole into a 5-foot-high dive flag to wave if you needed help on the surface. Safety stressed at all times. Oxygen and first aid available. You're 30 km. off the coast and Nimrod crew are prepared for any event. You signed in and out of every dive, recording depth and PSI. Nitrox analyzer for those using nitrox. Dedicated camera table. Your gear (mask, fins etc.) went under a bench and your tank and BC stayed where it was, and was refilled from a whip between each dive. Wetsuits hung up. Full gear rental available. Cod Hole dive with the giant groupers (called potato cods in Oz). Saw a minke whale at the start of the second dive and surface snorkeled with it for 45 minutes on trail lines out behind the boat. Only a few dive operations in Oz have licenses to snorkel with the whales. I saw lots of whitetip sharks, an octopus, tons of healthy coral, leaf scorpionfish, pipefish, stonefish, lionfish, a sea snake, hunting trevally, schooling jacks, turtles, on and on. We did a dawn dive on the last day; amazing to jump in the water in the dark, watch the sky getting rosy pink, look down for the schools of fish in your dive light indicating the bommie was down there, do the dive and watch the shift change from night

to day on the reef, and come up into the sunshine of the new day. I was able to rent a digital underwater camera from a shop in Cairns. Nimrod Explorer office recommended them. The camera shop owner came to the Explorer office and gave me a 1/2 hour mini-workshop on using the camera. At the end of the trip, I got a CD burned of all my pics.

**Spoilsport, February 2007, Tom and Lynn Hayes (tomhayes@cox.net), Pensacola, FL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy, surge, no currents. This was our first live-aboard after nearly 200 dives around the Caribbean. Unfortunately, our trip coincided with the development of two tropical storms, the result was the inability to dive a number of sites due to rough water, and only about 16 dives for the week. We were pleased with the dive experience on the Spoilsport. The cabins were nice, and everyone seemed pleased with the A/C and amenities. We paid a little extra for a larger cabin, and were pleasantly surprised at the size and condition. We experienced none of the problems with dripping condensation mentioned in previous reports, but it appeared they had installed drip trays to prevent the problem. Also, they encouraged us to keep the units running all of the time, to keep humidity down. The food was a pleasant surprise, both in quality and quantity. We had more than enough to eat, snacks and coffee were always available, and wine was provided with meals. Quality and variety were wonderful. We had two barbecue nights which included shrimp, steak and chicken cooked on the back deck. There was always plenty of fruits and vegetables. Diving was good under the storm conditions, and we could only imagine how good it could be under ideal conditions. Fish life was abun-

dant in size and variety, and the coral/sponges were spectacular. More fish life and sharks than we were used to seeing in the Caribbean. Currents were minimal, with some surge on the shallower dives. Most dives were unguided, unless requested. The staff were only too eager to jump in if requested, and were good at finding the unusual stuff. Profiles and maximum depths were recommended, but not strictly enforced. Dive briefings were thorough, but sometimes repetitive. Great care was taken to sign each diver out and in so there was no chance of leaving somebody in the water. Staff were extremely helpful in getting in and out of the water, often jumping in to assist anyone needing help re-boarding in the rough water. On-deck showers and freshly dried towels were available after each dive. Photographers were treated well, both in training and facilities, and on-board classes were offered. The staff photographer made DVDs of the weeks dives (for sale) which were nice mementos of the trip. The photo contest among the divers yielded some great pics of fish and coral life. We got in only 16 dives for the week, which was far less than the norm for this trip. The literature was clear that there would be no refunds due to weather, but Mike Ball surprised everyone by providing a 50% discount on a future trip. Every time we asked for something it was cheerfully provided, and staff went out of their way to make sure everyone had a good time.

**Spoilsport, July 2007, PJ Halter (pjhalter@hotmail.com), Airlie Beach, QLD.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 24 to C, calm, no currents. This is a special excursion — swimming with minke whales — only offered for 3 magical weeks a year off Cairns, Ribbon Reefs, Great Barrier Reef. Mike Ball has downscaled opera-

tions, but absolutely always has been, and still is, the best I've encountered. We've dove with 10 or more live-aboard companies. Diving the GBR, visiting famous Cod Hole, low-level flight over the GBR and watching whales up close and personal — it can't get any better than this. The service and food are superior. Get eye-to-eye with these special whales, before the Japanese eat them all!

**Spoilsport, September 2007, Jay Gould (jdg\_tgi@yahoo.com), Malvern, Victoria.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 25 C, choppy. The crew went out of their way at every moment to meet every need. The chef, if he opens a restaurant, will have us as permanent customers. The rooms were clean, fresh towels whenever required, and the bed was made everyday. You had the choice of going alone with your buddy, or one of the dive leaders led a group. More than sufficient opportunity for diving including two night dives and a fantastic shark feed dive. We did our Nitrox certification, and the instructor was professional. No warm shower or toilet facilities on the dive deck, and no toilets on the salon deck. Whenever you wanted to go to the toilet, you had to go to your cabin. Smoking was permitted on one side of the after-salon deck and if the wind was in the wrong direction, too bad for the nonsmokers. I asked for the smoking lamp to be out during a party on the after-saloon deck and was told that policy permitted the smoking. Frankly, they should be banned to the upper deck and if they have problems with the wind blowing out their smokes, tough! UW Photography Comments: Separate work area, separate fresh water tanks, professional onboard for assistance.

## FIJI

**Fiji Aggressor, June 2007, John and Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, choppy, no currents. We were met by the Aggressor driver at the Nadi Airport for our transfer to Suva where the boat was docked. Divers from around the USA and Italy, too, of a variety of ages and experience. Arriving in Suva at the Tradewinds, we found the dive director, Steve, from last year and other crew there who recognized us and welcomed us back. This trip we had booked the master cabin for ease of access. It would take volumes to describe the jokes, the laughter, the smiles, the teasing, the easy spirit, and the camaraderie of the group. Fabulous food that kept coming morning, noon, and night and in between to keep us energized for the fantastic diving! The temperature was mild, the wind was slight, the sun was sparkling, the water was brilliant blue, the coral was luxuriant and radiant, and the fish were teeming. The sharks came, the huge groupers, the jacks, the tunas, the Napoleon wrasses, the usual array of tropical fish, eels, even sea snakes. The small stuff was there for those who were patient enough to look. One evening we visited the Megagi Village. Last year we had gone there and afterward had sent the teacher photos of the children who danced for us. They had written thank you notes and we had written back in return. Now we had a special surprise for them — a new Toshiba laptop computer complete with the usual office software and a special National Geographic package of back issues up to the year 2000. At the village, the children gathered around my husband as he showed them the computer and