

ment was top of the line. It is a shame they use beat-up old pangas instead of investing in a nice dive boat with tank racks. All of the gear is thrown into the center of the panga and the divemaster/boatsman help you gear up. This is not the easiest for those of us who have been diving for a long time and are no longer in our 20s! The operator is set up for inexperienced divers wanting to do 1 or 2 dives. Their regimented operation and limited selection of dive sites appears to be set up to accommodate the general low level of experience diver that they encounter. I was using a cane, having recovered from leg surgery. I had just been diving since the surgery and knew I had no problem once in the water. I overheard the divemaster tell the boatsman in Spanish that he did not think I would be able to swim or complete the dive. Once in the water, I found the air had been put into my BCD without my knowledge; which delayed my descent. While attempting to descend I had an ear-block and was at 20 feet trying to clear. The rest of the group was waiting for me at 60 feet on the bottom. Carlo, the divemaster, got in my face and started hassling me — are you immediately descending or what?? I signaled an ear problem and that I wanted to swim above the group at 25 ft. and work my way down as my ears cleared — he would not allow this and I had to abort the dive and return to the surface. The water was calm, we were right off shore, viz was good, there were only 4 divers. On the second dive I descended on the anchor line (after taking some Sudafed) and had no problem clearing. We were kept in a tight group. I understand that there is no chamber on the island and nobody wants an accident. But considering the conditions around the island (pretty rough, no protected coves to speak of, 74-degree

water in the summer) and the poor quality of the boats used, you will not find a great dive experience here.

## COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for the big animal action off uninhabited Cocos Island, 300 miles offshore. Here are challenging, high-tension dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures. Land-based dive operations find a few big animals. However, they're unpredictable and the visibility is often so low you'll miss them, yet many divers like the diving. Costa Rica has great tourist destinations, is exceptionally safe.

**Almaco Diving, Villa Vista Azul, January 2007, Gregg Gaylord (gregg1954@aol.com), Sheboygan, WI.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy. Villa Vista Azul is a short walk to the beach and dive operation. The Villa is beautiful, with a phenomenal view. Diving was interesting but there were strong winds that prevented us from going to Bat Island. The winds change, though, and selecting the right time of year for certain destinations is important. The dive operation is excellent, with a stable 24-foot dive boat. The captain is superb! The dive masters are excellent and patient. Small snacks and water were provided. One of the most interesting parts of the trip was the interval periods spent on the innumerable beaches spread out along the peninsulas — each with its own unique characteristics. Turtle nests were apparent on some of them. Had an unforgettable encounter with a couple of humpbacks as we rode back to the launch site at the end of the

dive day. Many of the great beaches, volcanoes, and jungles are within a reasonable distance.

**AquaCenter Diving, Flamingo Beach Resort, April 2007, Glen Kitchens (wglenkitchens@msn.com), Cedar Crest, NM.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 74 to 82 F, surge, currents. Flamingo Coast is 2 hours from the airport in Liberia. Flamingo Beach Resort is nice, with a large generator that kicks in when the local power goes down, which is often. This is the only hotel in the area with own power source. The heat and humidity made this amenity worth the extra cost. Flamingo is a small area with numerous bars and restaurants within walking distance (lots of uphill/down-hill). scenic/photogenic. Aquacenter is not at the hotel, but they picked us up each morning and took us back after diving generally by noon. They have wash facilities/lockers for gear. Their boats are roomy and well-maintained. We had three divemasters (US/Britain/Italy), all attentive and knowledgeable. The longest boat ride was probably 20 minutes. Currents varied from light to strong on every dive, with varied (15-50 foot) visibility. Poor vis made close-up/macro photography important and made for some good, colorful photos. Lots of nudibranch and experienced divemasters to point them out. Our last day we got lucky at Catalina South and had best conditions of the trip with good vis, minimal current and numerous giant mantas. Topside we watched mantas breaching within 50 feet of the dive boat. Also saw numerous guitar sharks and lots of Pacific tropicals. If you're a new diver, stick with the Caribbean for awhile. But if you're ready for a new adventure, Flamingo Coast is worth a look. Aquacenter has two well laid-out boats with adequate fresh

water rinse.

**AquaCenter Diving, Flamingo Beach Resort, July 2007, Sherald Vogt (savjrv@sbcglobal.net), Arlington, TX.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 74 to 78 F, choppy, surge. We were treated well. Anna, with AquaCenter, arranged all our diving and other tours. The dive operation was professional and safety conscious. We did 5 dives in 2 days. The guides and staff were great. We saw a mother whale with her calf as well as dolphins on the way to Catalina Island for the first dive. We saw large turtles mating at the surface. The schools of fish were huge. Anna picked us up at the resort and took us back. They stored and rinsed our gear. We saw octopi during the day and white tipped reef sharks. The boat was not too crowded. We had plenty of snacks and water. Nitrox was not available. We did a zip line canopy tour, white water rafting, sat in hot spring pools, and saw the Arenal volcano erupt. We ate mostly at Marie's and the food was delicious. The lunches on our other tours were also delicious, tilapia, chicken, beef were some of the choices. The Flamingo Beach Resort was nice. The staff were wonderful; we were involved in a auto accident and the staff were supportive and helpful. Our room was spacious and clean. There were small crabs that came in (we were on the ground floor), but if you keep the AC on, they stop visiting. The resort grounds were beautiful. My husband died in a car accident while we were there and I was severely injured. They people of Costa Rica were wonderful. They took good care of me and my niece. They were nice and helpful. The resort comped the two extra nights I had to stay there because I had to have medical attention before I was able to travel. TAM tours representatives did every thing to assist us. DAN

was also helpful with the repatriation of my husband. I will definitely go back to Costa Rica. The land and the people are wondrous.

**Cano Divers, December 2006, Terry Anderson (tha@tamu.edu), Bryan, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Dove with Cano Divers, and stayed at their bungalows overlooking the ocean, which is at Pirate Cove: piratecovecostarica.com Comfortable and friendly people diving or going to large park in the Drake's Bay area. Everyone ate breakfast and dinner at the same time, and hosts created a happy atmosphere. Diving Isla de Cano is about \$125/day for 2 dives and a lunch on the island. DM Erik was good, and we never had more than 6 divers, some in training with another instructor. There are a half-dozen dive sites in front of island, 50 to 60 feet over coral clumps in sand, which cut the vis to about 40 feet, but we usually saw a half-dozen whitetip sharks, a half-dozen mobula, and large stingrays, eels, and a resident school of 100 horse-eyed jacks. The premier site was Devils Rock, a couple miles off the west coast of Isle de Cano. Vis about 80 feet, and half-dozen to a dozen white-tips hunting, mobula cruising overhead, 200 amberjacks, 100 horse-eyed jacks, few hunting tunas, groupers, and 8-foot nurse shark. Excellent Costa Rican diving, like Cat and Bat Islands can be if the vis is good off Playa del Coco.

**Costa Rica Divers, Jinetes de Osa, January 2007, Ben Glick (dglick@vgnernet), Williamstown, MA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 F, calm, choppy. There were minimal fish and corals were poor. The people at Jinetes de Osa were nice and prices were reasonable. Since the diving was poor, I did several extra land expe-

ditions and these were all great. Saw lots of birds, animals and interesting bugs. These trips are highly recommended. The trip to Cano Island was at least 45 minutes and sometimes rough. Basic lunch after diving. Note: only certain type of cell phone works in Costa Rica. All communication from Drake Bay by e-mail from Corcovado Expeditions. They book interesting trips to rain forest and are nice and fair people.

**Flamingo Marina Resort, December 2006, Tom Harvey, NJ.** Experience: Over 3000 dives. Vis: 10 to 40 Feet. Water: 80+ F, calm, small currents. Nice resort – getting old – food was just OK. The hotel service was minimal. The dive shop at the hotel was tourist at best. The boat was fine for the type of diving they do (if only a few divers show up). The divemasters are useless; they do not have a clue what's going on. It is only a 20-minute ride out to the dive sites. There is no Nitrox available and only two-tankers at most dive operators. I did 7 dives, 4 with the hotel dive shop. Zero on every account: no sharks, mantas, coral, vis. Fun but cheap \$65 for two tanks and a bite out of a watermelon. No towels, but I did get lucky on my first day: I dived with an operation owned by Javier Araya and his family. what nice people – they showed interest and provided great service. \$100 for three tanks. Be aware, check tanks before entering water. They use some very old equipment (tanks) around here. The vis was better than usual – 40 feet – and the marine life left the next day – all of them. There were humpbacks breathing on the way out and singing all through the dives. The whitetips were out and swimming. A huge school of eagle rays was darting every which way in the surge. At Dirty Rock hundreds of angel fish were eating sergeant major eggs, and free-

swimming green morays were present. A huge school of barracuda passed over my head. The treat was the 30 minutes I spent at 20 feet swimming with a 15-foot whale shark. At one point a manta swam 2 feet over the top of the whale shark. The next two days the marine life vanished. You figure.

**Manuel Antonio Divers, March 2007, Jeffrey Levin (jjlevin@aol.com), Bowling Green, OH.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 77 to 84 F, choppy. Raymond and Mindy Passavant are the owners. We had a bad experience with this company involving a diving and fishing trip to Cano Island, a sunset river tour, and the loss of a deposit on a ill-conceived nighttime zip-line tour they arranged. Unfortunately, we pre-paid for the trips on our itinerary. I am sure had we been presented with the charges after the fact, we could have contested the many items that we did not receive. We relied on the expertise of this tour operator to make the arrangements for a trip that should have been both appropriate and within the realm of possibility to execute. It was not until we returned that Raymond and Mindy informed us that this trip was perhaps pushing it. It was our understanding that there would be a lengthy boat ride to Cano Island where we might tour the island (yet never got closer than 50 meters from shore); we would have two scuba diving opportunities, and a snorkeling opportunity for the 2 non-divers. There was only one scuba dive and no snorkeling. The crew, who spoke little English, promptly left the dive site after the 40-minute scuba dive; they setup 5 fishing poles, and trolled the waters for sailfish and marlin at over 20 knts as we set a course for an unrequested, early return to Quepos. During our swift return to the Quepos dock, the 5

fishing hooks were baited twice. The first bait that was set had been torn from the hooks due to the brisk trolling speed. Needless to say, not even a nibble. Before we contacted the credit card company to dispute the charges, we tried to resolve our disappointment and complaints directly with Manuel Antonio Divers but were given a stern refused. We were guests staying at Villa La Macha, a fabulous residence overlooking the Pacific sunset. The owners of the home and their right-hand-man on the island, Jota, are generous, gentle, and fair-minded individuals who can and do get many benevolent things done in the Quepos area.

**Oceans Unlimited, July 2007, Divegirl180 (sataniccarebear@gmail.com), Lancaster, Lancs.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. The trip was about 2 hours because the ocean was initially a bit choppy. we arrived at Cano Island and our first dive site was Bajo Diablo. Schools of fish were everywhere; we saw some really nice schools of Jacks. Had a nice lunch on the beach and then headed back out to the second site. Numerous white tip reef sharks here on the sand and swimming around. Lots of schools of different fish and also a couple of stingrays. Saw some awesome coral formations on this second site as well. The journey back was broken up with sightings of about 4 different schools of dolphins. Overall, a super day out and some great diving.

**Ocotal Beach Resort, November 2006, Richard Himmel (rhimmel@cox.net), Mission Viejo, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 20 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 F, calm, surge, currents. Great off-season prices. Thoroughly enjoyed the resort and the diving. We didn't have to lug our gear once during our 5 days of

diving. Every member of the dive staff at Ocotal was helpful and professional, not to mention cheery and happy! In regard to “accidentally” dropping gear (2003), the only time this occurred was when I accidentally dropped a weight pouch at the surface while removing it from my BC at the end of a dive. Mauricio, one of the two divemasters on the boat, immediately dove down to the bottom (80 fsw) to retrieve it for me, cheerily handing it to me when he returned several minutes later. At some dive operations, I would have been told, “Sorry, you can buy a new pouch back at our shop,” for a stupid mistake like this or perhaps lectured by a 20-something divemaster with an attitude, as we’ve encountered in the Cayman Islands. At this time of the year in Costa Rica’s Pacific Northwest, the mornings are beautiful and sunny, with huge rainstorms moving in during the late afternoon and evening hours. The water was thick with plankton, limiting the visibility to 20 feet or less on all of our dives. Both my wife and I wore 3 mm full suits with hoods — there were lots of tiny jellyfish in the water and any exposed flesh got lots of small stings, especially when swimming against the current. We saw lots of porcupine fish, box fish, parrot fish, white-tipped and nurse sharks, eagle rays, moray eels and other assorted life. No whale sharks, unfortunately! We took the 90-minute boat ride to Bat Island (for an extra charge) in the hopes of seeing some bull sharks, but saw none. It was still worth the ride anyway for the beautiful coastline and surface intervals spent swimming in the turquoise water. At one dive site, a stone’s throw from the beach and the thickly forested hills, we heard the throaty roar of howler monkeys! Above the water, it never got below around 74 degrees F, even

when it was raining. The mosquitoes were ferocious after dark and, in the rainforest, even attacked during the day. Bring DEET and use it generously. Our standard room at the Ocotal Resort was very nice, with a flat-screen HD TV and an iPod-ready clock radio. We drank the tap water with no problems whatsoever. The buffet breakfast (included) was fantastic, almost as good as the view from the dining area. Pappa Rooster’s Bar and Grill, a short walk up the beach, had great ceviche (give some to the cat!), food and Pina Coladas at great prices. Upon checking out of Ocotal, we had no surprises whatsoever — no exchange rate tricks, no hidden taxes or charges, nothing. The resort staff, like the dive staff, were always cheerful, helpful and professional. The Hotel Borinquen, about a two hours’ drive away in the Rincon De La Vieja National Park, is a gold mine of a resort and another fantastic bargain. A few travel tips for Costa Rica: The internet car rental rates are amazingly cheap, but when you arrive, you find out about the \$28 per day mandatory insurance required by law. This brought our cost of renting a compact 4X4 to around \$50 per day. Local drivers are very aggressive and like to pass you if you’re not doing twice the posted speed limit. Drive carefully, though — there are very few police and virtually no paramedics or fire departments in the rural areas; if you get in a wreck, you will be on your own. The resort areas have lots of uniformed security guards to keep an eye on things. Outside the resorts, you should keep your eyes open, as there is a distinct absence of police. There is a departure tax of \$28 US per person to leave the country. Knowledge of Spanish is helpful, but not required, as most Cost Ricans speak a little English.

**Ocotal Diving, Ocotal Beach Resort,**

**April 2007, Howard Pressman, Edgewater, MD.** Experience: 275 dives. Vis: 10 to 40 feet. Water: 68 to 72 F, surge. In the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica (northern part of country on the Pacific side), visibility was low (very annoying) and water was cold with occasional warm spots. Schools of sting rays, many morays, hundreds of porcupine, puffer fish. Schools of butterfly and other reef fish. Some macro — nudibranchs, seahorses, clown shrimp. Some surge on most dives; occasional currents. Dive operation was topnotch — after initial setup, they changed and rinsed everything (including wetsuits) daily. Low vis. spoiled what would have been good diving. Beautiful rooms overlooking the Pacific on a mountainside. Fair to good food. Costa Ricans are friendly and accommodating.

**Ocotal Beach Resort, May 2007, Cindy Cook (ccook@bgsfirm.com), Fort Worth, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 5 to 15 Feet. Water: 70 to 78 F, surge. We had a wonderful experience staying at the Ocotal Beach Resort, which we had read about in the Divers' Chapbook. The hotel accommodations were excellent, although not luxurious. Our patio view of the Pacific was breathtaking and all three pools were well kept, each with a different theme. We particularly liked the one at the top of the mountain. All staff were friendly and happy to accommodate. We stayed at the "300" level rooms up the mountain from the beach but there is a van available at any time to drive someone down to the beach and back up. Food at the resort was good, although we ate dinner mostly in town (Playa de Coco) because it was fun. It is definitely a quiet resort but still fun. Our single brother-in-law who does not dive had a great time. The dive shop is one of the best operations we have ever dived

with; safety-conscious but never over-restrictive. They always have two DMs so one leads and the other follows up to try to insure no one gets separated since visibility can be low. Definitely plan on a wetsuit. My husband, who usually doesn't wear one, needed a 3 mm and a shorty. I was fine with my 3 mm and I always wear a suit. I was apprehensive about the diving due to the low visibility but quickly overcame any anxiety when we all met on the bottom after following the mooring line down. The marine life is incredible and well worth giving up some diving freedom. Several seahorses, clown shrimp There was a clean water bucket on the boat for cameras and, of course, the crew was accommodating about handling the camera getting in and out of the water. The dive masters were also good about hanging back on a particular site for anyone with a camera. This would not be an issue for clear water diving, but diving the sites we dived required two DMs — one in front and one in back. So the back-end DM would hang back to facilitate locating the remainder of the dive group.

**Rich Coast Diving, Villas del Sol, December 2006, Bob Sivak (bobsivak@cox.net), Mission Viejo, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. I chose Rich Coast Diving based on positive reader reports. Unfortunately, I found the operation has apparently changed since the new owners took over in December of 2005. Martin is a Dutch fellow who seems to be very concerned with all things PADI. As far as being a shop that caters to serious divers — well, I don't think so. On my first day diving we went to the famed Catalinas. The overflow charter boat they put us on (Salty Dog) was a joke. Nauseating levels of diesel smoke and so slow I'm sure

I could have swam faster (one hour and 15 minutes each way). The head was “closed to men.” Divemaster Edward is a diamond in the rough. Fantastic attitude. Catalina Island was a bit disappointing as well. Typical Eastern Pacific diving with few hard corals and so-so visibility. The other group on our boat had the expert divemaster, Julian, who found a school of 13 whitetips and 3 mantas. We saw none. We did see a couple of eagle rays, free-swimming morays and a fair selection of tropicals. Tortuga Point and Punta Argentina were only fifteen minutes away on Rich Coast’s own trimaran boat (it had a laughable engine configuration of one small outboard and one medium size outboard). Both sites had more hard corals than Catalina and more tropicals. I saw one whitetip that was a very cooperative photo subject, and one turtle. No babysitting with both DMs. Villas del Sol was adequate and with the all-inclusive rate, a good deal.

## ECUADOR

The Galapagos is the naturalist’s dream destination, above and below the surface, with all sorts of big fish action, and the remarkable life on each island. Several excellent live-aboards cover the area; however, the government is now limiting itineraries to reduce the impact of tourists.

### Isla La Plata

**Exploramar Diving, September 2007, Bill Mashek (bill@rubiconadventures.com), Forrestville, CA.** Experience: 1000+ dives. Puerto Lopez is a quaint fishing village centered in a crescent-shaped bay with a picturesque set-

ting. It is the launching area for whale watching trips and dive trips to the bird-rich Isla La Plata, also known as the “poor mans Galapagos. I got on a combined whale watching trip and dive trip with Exploramar Diving. It was about an hour-and-a-half jaunt to the island. The first 30 minutes we observed two humpback whales playing in the cool waters. During June to September, hundreds of humpbacks pass this area on their annual migration. The boat operator dropped off the whale watchers at the Islands park headquarters for a three-hour walking tour; two other divers, the divemaster and I found a moderately calm cove for our first dive: Dive one, 110 feet, visibility 50-60 feet. I didn’t have my gear and our included equipment didn’t have a computer so we followed the divemaster profile. Everyone was a good diver and there were no problems. The underwater structure was standard pacific coast rocks and boulders. Currents were moderate to strong and the fish life was prolific. We saw coronet fish, stone fish, puffers, 3 green turtles, many large moray eels. The show topper was two large (15-foot) mantas. Dive two, another cove not far from the first but more open and much stronger currents. 40- to 50-foot visibility. In addition to the copious fish population, saw two eagle rays, four (large and up-close) mantas, more large morays, and two turtles. I was impressed with the diving at Isla la Plata. The 8-hour trip cost \$95, included all equipment and diving (\$35 whale-watching and hiking only).

## MEXICO

The sea mounts of the Sea of Cortez have sea lions and occasional schooling hammerheads, though