

COSTA RICA

Aggressor, March 2007, Shawn and Jackie Nelson (spnelson85@hotmail.com), Monticello, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. The crew captained by Alberto Muñoz were awesome. They were all friendly, knowledgeable, helpful and had lots of energy. Total diver capacity is 22 but we had only 13 divers. If it were full it would have felt too cramped — especially during meals. We met some amazing people from all over the world (Germany, Spain, Holland, France, Costa Rica, New York, California). The food was good and abundant. There is an area for camera equipment on the Aggressor but sometimes other items ended up there. The small dive boats did not have an area for camera equipment other than a towel on the floor. Everyone has their own spacious compartment for diving gear. There are 2 showers on the dive deck as well. The diving was everything we hoped it would be: Lots of hammerheads (sometimes in schools of 100), white tips, a couple silvertips at Silverado, tons of different rays, eels, lobster, tuna, jacks, lots of octopus. Not much for colorful coral but lots of colorful fish. The water visibility wasn't great but we were told it was (in comparison to what it sometimes is). The water ranged from 70 to the low 80s with unpredictable thermoclines. The current was at times pretty wild but usually not bad at all and almost all the dives were 100 feet. Nitrox is highly recommended. We were on the 10-day trip (including the crossings to/from the island) and overall did 27 dives. We did 6 night dives with hundreds of white tips that "swarmed" around and sometimes bumped into us. The Aggressor was the only live-aboard at the island for a few days until the Undersea Hunter arrived. Two of the

Aggressor guests joined the Undersea Hunter crew for several hours one day to experience the DeepSee submarine adventure (about \$600 per person) for the shallowest (330-foot) dive. Since it was the dry season (good thing because this area gets 30 feet of rain annually), we had calm seas and only rain a couple times. We were told that the nastier the weather, the more shark action there is, but we were not disappointed. The island is lush and full of waterfalls. We were taken to the island to explore for a couple hours one day. There were also several times that we went to shore to "bathe" under some waterfalls or swim through a large crevice on our way back from dives.

Okeanos Aggressor, August 2007, Barbara Rizzardi (BERizzardi@msn.com), Sandy, UT. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 74 to 82 F, choppy, currents. Our group flew into San Jose, Costa Rica, requiring an overnight stay in a hillside hotel with beautiful views. After a 3- to 4-hour bus ride over the mountainous highway to Puertorenas, we boarded the Okeanos in the evening and departed immediately. The crossing to Cocos Island was rough, 36 hours over large swells, necessitating transcop patches and motion sickness pills. The staterooms were small but adequate in size, comfortable, and clean, with mostly a double bed and single bunk in each room and one quad room, each with a toilet/shower. They were cleaned daily. We moored in Chatham Bay which was protected and calm. Views from the boat were amazing, with dozens of waterfalls gracing the rainforested cliffs of Cocos and daily rainbows. Bird life was profuse. Even from the live-aboard, we saw mantas and dozens of silky sharks from the decks. Every dive was spectacular. Most dives were to 100 feet, all on

nitrox, and averaged 50 minutes. There were three day dives and one night dive each day. Dive sites were reached by pangas that accommodated 12 divers comfortably, each with built-in racks for tanks. The crew set up the tanks and assisted in checking nitrox levels. All dive times, nitrox mixes, and depths were carefully monitored. The crew was friendly and interactive. Nearly every dive we saw hundreds of hammerhead and white tip sharks, dozens of marble rays, several manta rays and eagle rays, profusions of tuna, bait balls containing thousands of fish, and dozens of eels (many free swimming). There were occasional turtles and dolphins and even a large frogfish walking around. Currents could be strong and could shift direction without warning. Thermoclines occurred at depth, dropping temps to the low 70s. Our group wore 3 mm or 5 mm wetsuits, with hooded vests, 5 mm gloves (needed to hang on to the rocks in current). Sharks and whale sharks are unafraid and approach closely. Night dives involved watching packs of white tip sharks in a feeding frenzy, covering the reef thickly. Overall, the diving was the best in my 32 years of diving anywhere. Cocos Island itself is like Jurassic Park. Access is strictly limited. Only the park rangers live there. There is an extra \$245 charge per person to dive the Cocos area, \$100 per person fuel surcharge, and \$100 per person charge for unlimited nitrox in addition to what we paid for a package deal for flight, hotel, diving, and the live-aboard. But still, worth every penny. The dive crew made a DVD of our diving, which amazes everyone who sees it.

Sea Hunter, April 2007, Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL
Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 F, choppy,

currents. A trip led by Sylvia Earle and augmented by the photographic expertise of Amos Nachoum to both Cocos Island and Malpelo Island! And, in addition, a chance to take some deep dives on the Deep See Submersible offered by the Undersea Hunter Group! We were looking forward to this great adventure with Sylvia Earle, when in January 2007, we were notified by Amos Nachoum that she had withdrawn from the trip for reasons cited were completely contradictory to generally available information and were questionable to say the least! It became apparent that she had no concern for either Amos Nachoum's high cost commitments, and situation of being left without a leader at the last minute, or for the investments of the participants based on their expectations of her leadership. Amos Nachoum retained Alex Antoniou, Director of Field Operations for the Shark Research Institute, to fill the leadership position on the trip in anticipation that he would acquaint the participants with his activities of tagging hammerheads and collecting data for research into the patterns of their presence and their behavior in and around Cocos Island. Amos Nachoum turned out not to be familiar with our particular cameras: Olympus 350 in Olympus housings with 2 Sea and Sea YS 90 strobes. Both were new cameras that had been set up by Cathy Church with instructions to use them with TTL settings on the strobes and manual settings on the camera. I had used my camera in the Caymans and had taken my camera to the Maldives, both with excellent results. Amos Nachoum, however, directed us to disregard Cathys instruction and to use manual settings on the strobes and use aperture priority settings on the camera, but we began to

get black and much underexposed results. The camera was not responding the way he expected, so he declared that we were not following his instructions and that the results were not possible although the settings we had used were recorded in the camera and showed up on my Photoshop picture profiles. It took many dives all with failed tests to convince Amos that his directions were inappropriate for our camera configurations. We finally realized that the synch chip connecting the two strobes would only operate on TTL and not at all in manual. When set on manual, the strobes did not deliver appropriate light even though they fired. End result was that most of our photos over several days of the trip were not exposed correctly and were of poor quality. We were then instructed by Amos to use TTL with aperture priority, but we still got poor results both in terms of the shutter speed assigned by the camera and the focus. The range of apertures possible just did not allow fast enough speeds to avoid the blur problems on these limited cameras. His final conclusion was that our cameras would not take good photos. That, however, was not correct. When on our next trip we went back to the procedures previously suggested by Cathy Church, the professional photographer who sold us the camera, we got great shark and reef photos. The lesson learned? Even when instructed by a distinguished professional photographer with a strong personality, you should not spend several days of your trip trying to do what they say if it does not work with your equipment. The Sea Hunter was not up to its game for our trip. In general, the cabin was cramped, there was no desk, chair, just a tiny space the width of the door with cabinets beside it and narrow twin bunks. The blankets

were not clean and caused me to suffer several nights of severe coughing before I removed them all and then was OK. The rail down the stairs to the cabin level did not extend all the way, giving nothing to hold for balance. There were no lines or trailers in the water to grab if someone fell overboard on the main boat or to assist divers getting on and off the dive tender boats. Once a diver did fall between the tender and main boat and was quickly dragged by the current behind the boat. They had run to the middle of the boat to retrieve a life ring with a line on it to toss to him from the back of the boat. Lines to assist divers approaching the dive tender were provided only briefly on our boat and then removed. The ladder on the dive tender was not stable and flopped around violently causing many bruises to arms and legs. That is where a line would have facilitated the approach to the ladder and removal of fins before getting whacked by the unstable ladder. Most serious of all safety problems was the asymmetrical floor level in the dining room. The corridor on the serving side was level. The corridor between the booths had two steps at the end of the center booth. This two step step-down was not even. The top step was much higher than the next one. Several people stumbled going down it. When leaving the diving area after lunch, even though I was holding on the backs of the booths beside the steps, the boat lurched (going between dive sites), I forgot about the uneven stairs in the suddenness of that distracting situation, and wound up being thrown across the floor on to a sill between the dining room floor and salon carpeted areas. That fall resulted in a huge hematoma on my back causing me to miss almost 2 days of diving! The disappointing net

result of this fall was a negative treatment of me and my subsequent diving by the crew. Some of the most egregious transgressions included a bogus rescue attempt when I was trying to board the boat after a dive. I had my foot on the ladder, my BCD unclipped, no fins, and safety sausage deflated when I was dragged away from the boat, stripped of my BCD and my air! Another indignity was the assignment of a dive master to shadow me and interrupt my dives thereafter. This action hurried me along during the dives not allowing photography of interesting subjects. Furthermore, it created a racing pace that was totally inappropriate for taking photographs. Also annoying was the refusal by both Wilson (dive master) and Amos to discuss these problems in order to sort out whatever misunderstanding had transpired. In another incident, I was chided for wasting water by rinsing myself in my dive skin with the dive deck shower although other divers routinely washed all of their gear in that manner and with the fresh water hose in the same place. The group on the tender that Amos Nachoum and Alex were assigned went to a greater variety of dive sites with better possibilities of seeing schools of hammerheads or other unusual creatures while those in our group were taken to less productive sites. For example, that group participated in attaching the tags to the sharks while we did not even get to watch that activity even though it was supposed to be the highlight of our leader Alex's efforts. Breakfast was nothing to remember. 3 choices of dry cereal, sour yogurt, plain bread toast, some sort of bland ham, brand X cheese (that did not look or taste like cheese), watery scrambled eggs (maybe), sometimes other items, but no choices or special orders.

Lunches and dinners were not particularly creative with beans and rice being the ubiquitous staple over and over and over again. The tortillas were rubbery and not particularly tasty either. Was there anything good about this trip? We went over to the Argos boat, the recently added Undersea Hunter Group research ship where the Deep See submersible was docked and we took some dives. I went to 300 feet with another guest and I and my husband dove to over 1000 feet together. The Deep See holds two passengers and a pilot. He was excellent and gave us a thorough briefing. We saw interesting creatures during these dives and took both digital photos and video. Also, we received a DVD of more photos and video of the combined trips from ours and the rest of the group who made the dives. On the Sea Hunter, the area for camera equipment was serviceable with adequate charging stations, rinse buckets, towels, and other amenities one would expect. Support for rebreathers was available. Two divers had brought their own rebreathers. Storage for dive gear and suits was adequate. The dive deck was spacious. The salon had a good flat screen TV and good AV equipment. There were comfortable sofas, a library, and videos to watch. Décor was attractive. AC worked pretty well except that we constantly used our personal electric fan in the cabin. A PC with Photoshop was available for photographers to use.

Undersea Hunter, June 2006, Sue Cropper, Wyckoff, NJ. Experience: 1856 dives. Vis: 30 to 90 feet. Water: 78 to 83 F, calm and flat, choppy, surge, strong currents, no currents. Great trip! The fact that divers are ferried to and from dive sites in tenders rather than pontoon boats makes a tremendous difference. Assigned GPS locaters

(EPIRBs), which weren't necessary with our trip but added to the confidence and safety. Boat operators were better than good — and this is high voltage diving. We were lucky to have extremely flat conditions. If one wants to be surrounded by hammerheads, reef sharks and squadrons of oceanic silkies, this is the operation for it.

Undersea Hunter, December 2006,

Tom Harvey, NJ. Experience: Over 3000 dives. Vis: 25 to 150 Feet. Water: 80F, choppy, currents. The ship is great for 12 divers. 30-hour crossing can be rough. This was my ninth trip to CoCos Island. Great crew and dive staff. Plenty of camera space and electric outlets. Great pangas — very seaworthy. The EPIRBs are welcome. The food was the best and plentiful. Easy Nitrox (only 32%). Lots of rain, but that is to be expected at CoCos, as is the sometimes heavy currents. You might need to go deep to see the hammers. The night dive is fun to do twice, but that's all. The shore excursions are a lot of fun, but use caution. Orcas, whale sharks, mantas, huge schools of fish, tuna. I saw in an ocean of 3-foot cubera jacks spawning for ten minutes. At a safety stop, I took a ten-minute shower, washed my dive skin and smoked a cigarette before falling asleep after that dive — wonderful! There were white tips, silkies, silver tips, Galapagos, orcas, whale sharks, mobula, manta, eagles, marble tuna, wahoo. I am always amazed at the end of most live-aboard trips when talk turns to tipping. I have been on over 60 live-aboard trips and have had usually excellent times (one or two — not to be named — were nightmares and I reacted in kind when tipping), but I do not understand European and Asian policies toward tipping. The crew provided every service and they stiff them anyway. The crew on the

Undersea Hunter and the Sea Hunter treat you as family no matter how deep your pockets are. Alvero is a great friend and dive guide. You should be aware that you need to be responsible for yourself when diving Cocos.

Undersea Hunter, June/July 2007, Laurence Schnabel (schnabel@lbbslaw.com). Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 81 F, some strong currents but currents manageable. Boat immaculately maintained, food superb (e.g., filet mignon wrapped in bacon at one dinner), divemasters who lead the dive skilled and let you dive your own profile once you convince them you are proficient. Hordes of hammerheads, marble rays and white tip sharks; encountered one baby whale shark under the Sea Hunter and another over 30 feet long at dive site Alcion. The reputed ocean crossing from Hell was not bad, and glassy seas on return trip. Rained almost every day as this is rainy season. The Sea Hunter carried on her stern a 3-person submarine in which for prices running as high as \$1500 (price dependent on depth) you can descend 600 feet or more. You back roll off a twin outboard boat (not off the Sea Hunter itself) and climbing the portable ladder back into the boat is challenging for divers weak in arm strength or unsure in their balance. You can remove your BC and tank and hand it up to the boat operator. If you have a day to spare in San Jose, visit the Peace echo resort about 1-1/2 hours by car out of the city. Breathtaking waterfalls, live bird, snake, frog and butterfly confined in compounds or (snakes) glass cages. You can hike on Cocos — no snakes on island but there are feral pigs, deer and cats — bring good hiking shoes as rain makes some areas slippery.