

ECUADOR

Galapagos Islands

Aggressor II, May 2007, Dave Demming (ddemminf@demmingfinancial.com), Hudson, OH. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 68 to 71 F, calm. Good dive operation, wonderful crew and good food. Office coordination for our reservations ashore was mediocre.

Aggressor II, July 2007, Michael Shwayder (gorynt@yahoo.com), Marina del Rey, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 62 to 76 F, calm, currents. 10 crew for 14 guests. Dive briefings were complete. Divemaster GianCarlo was excellent as naturalist and divemaster. We had great weather; the long passage to Darwin and Wolf Islands was relatively calm. Currents were moderate but one did have to get down quickly in order to stay with the group. We were lucky at Darwin Island and saw at least one whale shark on every dive! There were healthy schools of hammerheads numbering over 100 and flotillas of spotted eagle rays on some dives. I was comfortable in a dry suit. Most of the others wore 7 mm wetsuits and they admitted to being cold after some of the dives when the temperature was in the low 60s. Food and service were excellent; the cabins were for two and were individually air conditioned.

Aggressor I, August 2007, Aaron Hayden, CO. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 50 Feet. Water: 60 to 74 F, surge, currents. The checkout dive sucks! 60 degrees with 10-foot vis at the best. No one even checked us out to see whether or not we could dive. The next two dives were just as cold, with a little better vis and more to see; however, I

did a land tour instead of diving. That in itself said a lot for a hard core big critter guy. I dove Coco in 1999 and I think I know what I should have seen in the Galapagos. I am disheartened to see less hammers, less jacks and less everything at the Galapagos. I did not expect to find a small city on any of the islands, much less a small armada of boats big and small. As usual, the government is too late in regulating this wonderful and unusual place. The entire area should be closed off to any fishing and strictly regulated to all land and diving operations. The diving is still world class and the critters are still there; however, the ocean is being raped and turned into a barren desert by fishermen with no morals or any idea of preserving their way of life just to make a buck. I hear tell of Orientals killing hundreds of seahorses on cousins rocks to sell them as aphrodisiacs. I am glad that my wife was able to dive with Galapagos sharks and with many whale sharks, turtles, hammers, silkies and rays before they are all gone! We did have four straight dives with whale sharks. What awesome fish. Lots of eels and barracudas and jacks. We dove Wolf and Darwin for 2 days. That was all that we were allowed to dive it. UW Photography Comments: Rinse tanks, camera tables, battery charging and handling where excellent. The crew was topnotch when it came to cameras. The only thing that was lacking was a no-liquid rule on the camera table.

Aggressor I, August 2007, David Fun-derburk (RCRUS@What-wire.com), Greeley, CO. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 60 Feet. Water: 66 to 75 F, choppy, no currents. We dove 4 dives at 2 dive sites at Wolf Island. Dove 7 dives at the same site at Darwin's Arch. The dive sites are strictly regulated by the Park Service. I would have preferred

a little more variety. Nevertheless, Darwin's Arch is a spectacular dive site. A 5 mil wet suit was plenty, although there were times I was chilly. Due to the sharp rocks, gloves are a must. We were supposed to dive 2 dives at Cousin's Rock, but didn't. Strangely, though, the Aggressor II did get to dive there. Our captain had an excuse, but I got the feeling they just did not want to go to that site. Otherwise, the crew was great, attentive and helpful. We had a \$100/person fuel surcharge even though gasoline in Ecuador is only \$1 a gallon. On our flight back to Quito, the Aggressor guide said he got us on an earlier flight but this was not true. I think he was just using this as an excuse to get us to the airport early. Land excursions were great. Richard, our divemaster, led them and he was informative. UW Photography Comments: Large camera table. Small area for charging batteries.

Aggressor II, September 2007, Bill Mashek (Bill@rubiconadventures.com), Forrestville, CA. Experience: over 1000 dives. We were on the Galapagos II. A topnotch and photo-friendly boat with an excellent crew. Aero-gal flew us to Baltra, where we were met by the Aggressor crew and shuttled to our boat. The first dive was that afternoon, a nonimpressive check out dive. Dive Two (day 2) was Mosquera point. Visibility over 15 meters; maximum depth 70 feet. little current, sea life included: 2 green turtles, 2 white tipped sharks, one marble ray, a mola mola (sunfish). The topography was a rocky ledge. Dive 3, same spot, maximum depth was 56 feet. Same marble ray and fish, but we played with a bull sea lion (not normally recommended). Dive 4 and 7. Land Slide. Wolf Island, visibility over 80 feet (25 m). Strong currents. 4- to 6-foot swells with consistent surge. We dropped to

rocks and held on. Hundreds of hammerheads, black tip, white tip, silky and Galapagos sharks. Large schools of eagle rays floating in the currents. Huge morays throughout the rocky structure. Saw 5 green turtles. Dive 5-6 Stark Bay, visibility 60-80 feet. moderate currents. Saw several dolphins, more sharks. Dive 8, 9, 10 Darwin Arch. 85 feet, visibility over 80 feet, moderate currents. Hammerheads, Galapagos, blacktip. Pod of dolphins. Eagle rays, Creoles. Several curious sharks came within a meter of my camera. Prolific fish population. Dive 11 Wolf Island Landslide. Again sharks, rays, prolific fish. My dive buddy was low on nitrox and wanted to go back towards the pangs. We hit the blue water current and were separated. Huge swells, strong surge and no boat or buddy in site. I was drifting farther away. My dive alert was useless. The wind made it difficult to keep my dive flag vertical (if needed, all divers had GPS tracking devices). I felt a bump on my fins. When I looked under the surface, there were six silky sharks circling my feet. I fended them off with my dive flag; it was still a little scary until I saw Walter and the panga about 40 yards away coming to pick me up. I was happy to get in that boat. Dive 12-13 Cousins Rock; Visibility 70 feet. An old eroded crater made a nice rocky cliff dive. The many cracks and crevices were full of surprises, including 2 seahorses and a frogfish. We saw two young sea lions chasing a shark. Dive 14-15. Gordon Rocks. Visibility 50 feet +. Interesting dive site between two rocks. This area can get a strong surge, especially if there is any swell. Many rays, octopus, and several sea lions were observed at this site. Galapagos Aggressor is a first-class operation and one of two operators who have permits for land and dive excursions.

Galapagos Aggressor II, May 2007, Dave Demming (ddemming@demmingfinancial.com), Hudson, OH.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 120 to 200 Feet. Water: 69 to 72 F, calm. Divers could dive their own profiles, with many 60-plus-minute profiles maximizing the use of nitrox. The on-ship operations were outstanding, with the crew and the food excellent. This contrasted with the poor coordination from their home office in the states in adding several unnecessary days waiting for flight connections both coming and going. Unfortunately, most of the good will and positive impression they gained from their operations (my dive partner had never been aboard an Aggressor boat before) were lost by their office screw-ups.

Mistral, September 2006, Mark Tarczynski (to_da_moon@hotmail.com), Los Angeles, CA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Choppy, currents. We arrived San Cristobal Island and were ferried to the Mistral without incident. We're assigned our bunks and set about unpacking and setting up our gear. We get underway to our first dive site, which is typically a quasi-checkout dive. This dive is pretty miserable since you'd have to shovel your way any deeper than 20 feet. Hardly a dive to get you properly weighted. Next day, we're up early. Eat a banana or two and get wet. The diving is pretty good. Visibility is great. We see hammerheads, huge Galapagos sharks (about 14 to 16 feet long). Water temps are a comfy 71 degrees. We get in another dive with similar results. The third dive is canceled 'cuz the air compressor motor had to be replaced and the crew couldn't fill our tanks fast enough. Next dive is a night dive at Wolf Island where we photograph the very weird red lipped bat fish. On these trips, the Divemaster is the "Ruler" of

the boat. The Captain rarely speaks English and is there only to pilot the ship — that's all. It's the Divemaster's responsibility to insure guest safety as well as a pleasant dive trip. The Divemaster directs the Captain to do what he decides is best for the guests. Unfortunately, our Divemaster was a Dive-Nazi moron! Normally, the Divemaster gathers the guests and briefs them on the "dos" and "don'ts" of the boat. Unfortunately, this briefing never happened. For example, we were 36 hours into our trip when someone discovered that we weren't supposed to flush toilet paper down the head. Being an inexperienced Divemaster, this guy forgets to distribute dive flags and dive-alert horns to his guests. This is standard operating procedure since Galapagos currents are rippin' fast and divers are often times "lost." An extended dive flag and a dive-alert horn insure the Panga (little rubber boat with a motor) will find you and pick you up. We did four dives without these pieces of emergency gear until one of our group had enough presence of mind to ask if this emergency gear was available on the boat. The Divemaster says "Oh yeah ... I forgot," and points out where the gear was. No wonder why our Dive-Nazi Divemaster is freaking out on every dive 'cuz we won't stay in a little group and follow him! It's all because he forgot to give us the emergency location gear so he's afraid we'll get lost. Unfortunately, one diver in our group stupidly got bent (decompression sickness) just before we arrived Darwin Island. We had to steam back to Baltra to get him to a hyperbaric chamber. Because the boat's top speed was half that of normal boats (7 knots), it took us 29 hours to arrive Baltra. We lost a day and a half of diving. The rest of the trip consisted of limited diving around the southern

Galapagos Archipelago. We got to play with sea lions and saw penguins. We did some land tours and saw marine iguanas and the blue footed booby bird and the Galapagos tortoise. Most boats have top speeds more like 14 knots. A 7 knot boat means you're taking an extra day to arrive at Darwin Island. That "lost" day of diving is worth an extra \$500 alone. No Nitrox! If they had Nitrox, the potential for DCS is diminished (to be fair, the DCS accident is no fault of the Mistral's). The boat normally carries 16 divers and two Dive masters. The swim step is so crowded that gearing-up and loading into the panga is an exercise in frustration and resembles controlled pandemonium. UW Photography Comments: Mistral's accommodations for UWPs was miserable. Nothing more than a picnic bench on the aft deck covered with a white tablecloth. Had Delta Airlines not lost my underwater camera gear, the camera table would've been too overcrowded.

MEXICO

Guadalupe Island

San Diego Shark Diving, Horizon, November 2006, Brent U. (robust@roggers.com), Kitchener, ON. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 65 to 68 F, choppy. The 22-hour crossing to the island was rough enough to make a person prone to sea sickness a little queasy. Even when anchored at the island, the boat would rock pretty good when the wind kicked up. The first great white showed up as the crew were getting the cages ready on the first morning at Guadalupe. On the first day there were always sharks around including a huge 16-foot female. On the second and third days the sharks

didn't show up until the afternoon and were not as consistent. When the sharks were around, the diving was incredible. When there weren't any sharks, there was little else to see. Despite some rough water and occasional boredom, the chance to see great whites up close was amazing and one of my best diving experiences. The crew of the Horizon and San Diego Shark diving were both topnotch. Apparently there are higher numbers of sharks early in the season, but the big females don't show up until mid-October. For divers wanting to protect the sharks at Guadalupe, you can check out the Guadalupe Island Conservation Fund at www.guadalupe-fund.org.

Solmar V, August 2007, Steve Wenc, Laporte, IN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 70 to 72 F, calm, choppy. The Solmar V is the first class all the way. The CEO of Shark Diving International, Laurence Groth's enthusiasm for great white sharks is contagious. He worked nonstop from sunup to sundown every day to make sure everyone was happy. The entire crew could not have been nicer. I was given a last-minute cut-rate deal, a solo cabin and free underwater video camera rental. This trip started in San Diego at 8:00 a.m. After a four-hour chartered bus ride across the border into Mexico, we arrived at Ensenada, where we boarded the Solmar V. The 180-mile voyage to Guadalupe took about 18 hours. We had beam seas coming and going so the ride was a little rough. Lots of patches and Dramamine. Laurence and the crew began chumming as soon as we anchored and we had our first shark within 15 minutes. They have a 100% success rate for locating great whites on this trip. I've been around a lot of different shark species, and these guys are in a class all by themselves. They look you right