

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

fishing continues wipe out the big fish. Still, there's good diving from Cabo Pulmo to San Lucas and even farther north operators are getting to the seamounts. In winter and spring water temperatures can drop to the low 60s. Visibility is lower (25-40 feet), but generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer, when the water warms to the 80s in the Sea of Cortez. From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult. Wear a skin or wetsuit for protection from jellyfish. Socorro Island has hammerheads and mantas, though it's a long ride from Cabo and there's no guarantee of sharks or good weather. Manta sightings are reliable and they have a reputation for letting divers approach. One can find good accommodations and food at all the dive venues north of Cabo. Farther south, Pacific diving is dulled by low visibility.

Cabo Pulmo

Vista Sea Sport, Coral Baja, September 2007, Robert George (r_george@sbc-global.net), Leawood, KS. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 20 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy, currents. Mark runs efficient, accommodating, safe operation from rather remote Buena Vista, an hour's drive north of San Jose del Cabo and 45-minute boat ride north of Cabo Pulmo dive area. Our trip, one week after Hurricane Henrietta, wasn't a good example of what the diving might be. Vis @ 15-20 feet and currents @ 3+ mph created less than optimum conditions. Boat captain, Diego, did a great job of monitoring diver location and picking divers up quickly, even though we were scattered by strong currents.

Bat rays were entertaining and critters abound. Coral Baja in San Jose del Cabo great and San Jose quieter than Cabo San Lucas, but not good location for a 'dive-oriented' trip. Better to go to La Paz or get close to dive operation. Vista Sea Sports is small group oriented with 6-pack style 130 hp outboard and good shade.

Cabo San Lucas

Amigos Del Mar, November 2006, Norris Boone, Taylors, SC. Our group of four had advanced reservations for a 3-day package, with specific days to dive for the cash price of \$269/person. When we arrived at the shop the day before our dives, the owner (Kevin) was "too busy" to discuss our plans. But we were informed that our dives had been changed to alternate days, necessitating that we change our vacation plans. The first dive across the bay went well, with a short boat ride, a good dive guide, and lots of fish. Short fills (2600 psi). On day two we were scheduled to go to Cabo Pulmo and, at Kevin's urging, the following day to Gordo Banks to see sharks. Cabo Pulmo turned out to be a 2.5-hour ride in a taxi with bald tires and a bad driver who continuously weaved the van and could not decide on accelerating or braking. We loaded our gear in open boats and again found short fills (2600 psi). We were dropped among some rocks with a lot of puffer fish. We did see a lot of big fish. However, as this is a "national park," we were not allowed to stop to see the little fish or to use flashlights to look in rock crevices. If you got within two feet of the sand, you were pulled off and scolded by the dive guide. For the second dive we were dropped back in the same rock pile to see the same fish. The boat driver's family provided a

tasty fresh fish taco lunch. We did wonder which part of the park the fresh fish had come from. The next day, we again were informed Kevin was “too busy” to prepare the bill then (or to explain there would be an up charge), but he would have it ready when we got back from the dive. As we loaded onto the boat we were informed this would be a deep dive (120 feet) and upon checking the tank pressures, we again found at most 2650 psi. Paulo, the dive guide, informed us this would be enough, as these tanks were already on the boat and looking for new tanks would delay our departure. Off we went for a 2-hour boat ride. Paulo said that it would have been faster, had the prop not been bent the previous week. The plan consisted of swimming in the blue water (80-120 feet) looking for sharks. Paulo led us, while also looking for an anchor lost the previous week. After ten minutes of swimming, Paulo saw his lost anchor and swam down to attach his tag buoy to it. At least one-third of our dive time was wasted on his anchor retrieval. We swam some more and Paulo pointed out in the blue what he later told us were sharks. The sharks were small dots of white and gray in the distance. The next dive Paulo again spent about one-third of the dive time attaching our borrowed safety sausage to the anchor to get it to the surface. He again pointed out small dots (sharks) in the distance. This was supposed to be our shark dive? Finally, we had a 2-hour boat ride back. Kevin had left the bill with his obnoxious assistant. Instead of the \$269 cash price that had been agreed upon for early booking, he had added \$50 to each diver for “extra” dive costs. Kevin was called by phone to explain this, but said that we had taken longer dive trips than were in the package and would not change the price. He had never

explained this prior to doing these dives and he had been the one to change our dive plans. This left us short on cash. The obnoxious assistant informed us that there would be a 20% up-charge if we wanted to use our credit card that he had on file at time of booking.

Land’s End Divers, November 2006, Lyn Greenhill (lyn.greenhill@yahoo.com), Granite Bay, CA. Experience:

101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 81 F, choppy. All diving at Cabo is done from small outboard-powered boats using backroll entry and BC removal to get back into boat. Only 6-10 divers on each boat. This operator is steps away from harbor and almost everyone speaks good English. Dive-masters and boat captains at Land’s End are eager to help, will do everything for you if you like. We stowed our gear in their hanging area after each dive, they rinsed it and had it back on the boat the next day. No particular grouping of skill levels but they weren’t concerned about bottom time so more experienced people could stay down as long as they wanted. Most dive sites are a few minutes from harbor and are generally pretty well trampled. Shore intervals are done back at the harbor so food/drink is easy to come by. There are public showers right next to harbor (by cruise ship pier) to rise off salt. Lots of fish, especially if you feed them. Generally no current unless near the point between Pacific and Gulf. Dive operator provided bottled water on the boat after diving. If possible, ask to go east from harbor towards San Jose, to sites such as the Blowhole and Whale’s Head, which have much less traffic. The diving was great there. Cabo is probably a 2 or 3 day diving destination.

La Paz

Club Cantamar, October 2006, Janna Binder (jbinder@prconline.com), Omaha, NE. Experience: 100 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy, currents. The dive resort is annoying until you get the hang of it: breakfast food always runs out and everything is slow. The dive operation is great. They were accommodating and made sure we saw what we wanted to. The sea life is amazing. Hundreds of eels — 7 species, whale sharks, pilot whales, a pod of 1000+ dolphins, jawfish, friendly CA sea lions, eagle rays, and one hammerhead. On two dives we went looking for hammerhead schools, but only found one hammerhead. Eels were everywhere, as were starfish. Saw two turtles. Vis isn't great, but not bad. Currents can be tricky, but shouldn't be a problem for experienced divers. Fly into La Paz, not Cabo — 4+ hour bus ride from Cabo was not fun.

Club Cantamar, December 2006, Edward Leibowitz (eleibow@pica.army.mil), Jersey City, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 5 to 20 Feet. Water: 60 to 70 F, calm. I read the Undercurrent article about this resort last year. In the article you said that in December this area gets high winds. You were absolutely correct. It was not a great month to dive the Sea of Cortez. I wanted to go earlier, but was afraid I'd get caught in hurricane season, which seems to go into November in Baja. I signed up for a five-day, three dive/day package. Due to wind conditions, I virtually skipped two days of diving. When the day is bad for diving, it is up to the divemaster or resort to cancel the diving. In this case the resort will refund the money for the lost day of diving. If, however, you decide on your own that you don't want to dive due to high wind and poor visibility and the resort offers to take you diving, you

will get no refund if you don't do the dives. On my first dive, I was wearing a 7-MM wetsuit and separate hood. My Mares diving mask was leaking badly and I was underweighted. For these reasons, I never completed the first dive. On another dive to the wreck of the Fan Ming, I had trouble getting down without a downline and had to abort this dive. There was current and the sea was rough and our group had drifted about 100 feet from the boat. On the second day, the spotter plane spotted 19 whale sharks. The group I was with snorkeled and I got very close to the mouth of a 15-foot whale shark. I think you might do just as well seeing the whale sharks on the boat as you do snorkeling. The seas were very rough on this day and I got very seasick. Both Antonio and Marco were very willing to assist you with putting on and taking off your gear if requested. Antonio, the divemaster, tested my mask and found out it was leaking on the lower right-hand side. I was very grateful to him for discovering this problem. The best restaurant was the pricey Bismarck. They do not take credit cards. The Chinese restaurant across the street from Scotia Bank was also very good and economical.

Club Cantamar, August 2007, Chuck Pinkham, El Segundo, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 74 to 81 F, calm, currents. The highlights of the trip were playing with sea lions, which was fun but I had done so many times before in California's Channel Islands, and exploring a medium-sized wreck whose Chinese name escapes me. Divemasters ranged from being energetic and fun to dive with to being over controlling to the point it could ruin your dive. The main dive site to look for hammerheads, El Bajo, was promised and scrapped twice

with no explanation. This led to diving the same dive sites repetitively. Overall, I believe it is a safe dive operation but not a accommodating or organized one. The front desk made quite a few mistakes and had quite a few upset customers. The Club is a remote dive hotel — not quite what I would call a resort. It is 45 minutes from town or anything worth exploring, but they do take you into town 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM daily. The Club's backside borders cargo liners and trucks loading/unloading 24/7. Can be pretty noisy. First night my AC did not work even after they tried to fix it and they would not move me to another room. I had to leave the doors open for ventilation but the noise kept me up most of the night. The next day they fixed it. There were quite a few diving staff members and divers I met that will help nurture some fond memories. I would be hard-pressed to recommend this operation to anyone. UW Photography Comments: Crew helpful with equipment needs. Simple rinse — plastic drum. Limited visibility and strong currents with debris made for difficult photography at times. Several spots had high degree of unattractive algal growth.

Puerto Vallarta

Chico's Dive Center, July 2007,
Thomas R. Chase (trchase@msn.com),
Prospect, KY. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 72 to 80 F, choppy, surge. We went to Marietas Island, which is known for large pelagics. Unfortunately, the visibility was poor due to heavy rainfall. The water was also fairly cold (72 F below the thermocline). The next day we did a combined snorkel/dive trip to Majahuita. That was a nice trip. The only drawback is the boat is slow. Our

last dive was a night dive at Los Arcos. It was excellent. The visibility was not great, but the abundant life was stunning. I have never seen so many eels. They also had schools of puffer fish. My daughter saw a couple of seahorses at the end of the dive. The staff were outstanding and did everything they could to accommodate us. Especially helpful were the staff from the shop at Barcelo Resort (where the night dive departs). The conditions weren't the best, but the staff and service were great. Not geared toward photographers.

Zihuatanejo

Zihuatanejo Dive Center, May 2007,
Ron Clark (rbclarkconcrete@shawus.com), Willis, TX. Experience: 50+ dives. Vis: 15 to 60 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, calm and flat, surge, no currents. Zihuatanejo had varied vis. Lots of fish schools. Shoreline dives had a strong surf surge. Very shallow 40 feet max. Offshore w/great vis. down to 80 feet. Hotel Iruna is great as usual. No all-inclusive. Bu Playa las Latas or the Town of Zihuatanejo has great food.

UNITED STATES

California

Catalina Island

Catalina Divers Supply, August 2006,
Laura Mosqueda, Pasadena, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 60 to 66 F, calm. The diving off Catalina Island is beautiful: kelp forests, the giant black sea bass are making a wonderful comeback, garibaldi, rockfish, scorpionfish, nudibranchs, and an occasional sea lion zips by. The boat is great for diving: easy off (giant stride off the back) and on (sturdy ladders).