

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

in the eye and try to stare you down. We had as many as seven circling the cages at a time and I'd say they were all between 10 and 15 feet. They came close enough to touch, although we were told not to. The action was nonstop all day, everyday. There were two cages attached to the stern with four divers in each. We rotated in one-hour intervals to start. Everybody got as much time in these cages as they wanted and after awhile you could stay in there basically as long as you wanted. Everything was done off hooka lines. They also had a submersible cage that was lowered to 35 feet. One diver at a time was taken down with the dive master. He wore a full face mask and had radio contact with the surface. There were two bailout bottles in the bottom of the cage in case something happened to the hooka lines. They are the only outfit in the world offering a submersible cage experience. Laurence has an ongoing identification program and they have identified 99 different sharks frequenting this tiny island. We were also taken on a panga ride where we saw seals, sea lions and elephant seals on the shore. We were not allowed to go on the island itself. UW Photography Comments: There was a large area with shelves for all camera equipment. there was plenty of space for everyone. Fresh-water rinse tanks were provided.

Revillagigedo Islands

Nautilus Explorer, February 2007, Bob Ewald (rewald@bellsouth.net), Louisville, KY. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 72 F, calm. Website contains an excellent, up-to-date, Captains log that let us know exactly what to expect and the latest conditions. Boat leaves from Cabo San Lucas and the run to the Revillagigedo (Socorro) Islands takes about

24 hours. Except for one site where we dove from the back of the boat, diving was from a dingy. We found the boat to be in good condition with an outstanding crew. At least two dive masters were in the water on every dive and we were free to follow them or go on our own. The primary restriction, as we were frequently admonished, was that, due to the currents around these small islands, if visual contact was lost with the wall or the reef, we should immediately surface as the current could carry us a long way quite quickly. However, currents were generally manageable as long as the diver stayed in protected areas near the walls and reef. There were two dinghies in that water at all times and pick-ups were quick. Mantas as well as many sharks, including silvertips, reef white tips, Galapagos and silkies. Riding mantas was not allowed, but petting mantas on the underside was permitted, as the mantas seemed to enjoy it. The same manta would sometimes make several passes just a few feet above us, allowing it to be petted. Humpback whales were around us on a number of dives. We frequently saw them on the surface and could feel them singing underwater as well as hearing them. Large schools of jacks were common and a surprising variety of reef fish was seen. On one afternoon we had a visit with a friendly dolphin that also seemed to enjoy being petted. Cabins were reasonably spacious for a live-aboard, all with individual heads and showers, and air conditioning that was controllable. Lounge and dining area were spacious and comfortable. Dive deck was larger than most live-aboards, with a large camera table on the dive deck. Food was good to excellent, with the usual goodies provided between dives. Crew took good care of cameras and handled them carefully when handing down and up. Large dive

deck and photo table. Large dip tank for cameras only. Crew was careful with cameras and cooperative in handing up and down from dinghy.

Solmar V, December 2006, Sean Bruner (sean@bruner.net), Tucson, AZ.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy, surge. The owners, Jose Luis and Leslie Sanchez, were on board for this trip. They just took over the ownership of the boat a year ago and have refurbished it, so some of the negative comments that appeared in previous chapbooks may no longer be valid. The boat left Cabo San Lucas at 5 p.m. for the 24-hour crossing to San Benedicto. We got there in time for one checkout dive the next day. Expectations were high due to sightings of schools of hammerheads and two whale sharks on the previous trip. The following day, we had three dives at the Boiler, a manta cleaning station. A pod of dolphins played with divers, although when Laura and I got in the water they had already left. One manta and some hammerheads in the distance. Otherwise, somewhat uneventful. Headed out for Roca Partida the next day, where the whale sharks and hammerhead school were seen. We were disappointed. A single manta and a couple of Galapagos sharks were all we saw. Three dives and not much of the usual raging current. Next day off to Socorro Island. The day starts late due to check in with the Mexican Navy in the morning. They boarded the boat with guns, but were very respectful and unobtrusive. The diving at Socorro was a bust. Next day back to San Benedicto to dive El Canyon. Good silvertip action, some close encounters with mantas and dolphins. Final day back at the Boiler. This day made the trip. Six mantas on the second dive and four on the third. Very close encounters as they played with us the whole time

during both dives. Some divers swam off into blue water and saw a school of hammerheads reported to be up to 150, but at a distance, below 150 feet. All in all, a successful trip. The dive masters, Rey (8 years on the boat), Eric and Jorge, were always watching out for us. Some of the dives are from pangas and some are off the back of the boat, although the pangas are always in the water and you have the option of surfacing and letting the pangas pick you up instead of returning to the boat. The one time we drifted far into the blue observing a Galapagos shark that made a close pass, the panga was right there when we surfaced, a good distance from the dive site. Safety sausages are provided to those who don't bring one. Nitrox is available (\$100 extra). Tipping is encouraged but there is no pressure applied. Food is good and filling and special requests are honored. The rooms are small, consisting of a tiny top bunk and slightly larger lower bunk. Storage is extremely limited, although dive bags and camera bags are stored in a waterproof locker on deck. The cabins have in suite toilets and a hand-held shower above. It's tiny and one diver joked that he liked it because you could do everything at once. One nice touch is a DVD TV in the cabin because there are long boat rides on this trip.

Solmar V, December 2006, Jeanne and Bill Downey (travelexpert@comcast.net), Baden, PA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 81 F, choppy. The Archipelago de Revillagigedo consists of four islands — San Benedicto, Socorro, Roca Partido, and Clarion. This area is usually referred to as “Socorro Islands.” We landed at the San Jose del Cabo airport. A 45-minute taxi van drive put us at the Siesta Suites, our home for two nights in Cabo San Lucas. Siesta Suites is a great little

in-town hotel, close to all the action, but quiet enough to sleep. It has a homey, welcoming feel with basic, clean rooms, all with refrigerators and some with kitchens. There is a restaurant/bar next door, although not owned by Siesta Suites, which is a popular place to eat and hang out. It was a bit pricey, but we had leftovers that lasted two days. There are many other restaurants close by, and lots of establishments for night time fun. It's possible to see pretty much the whole town on foot; some of the beaches would be a drive. Although pick-up is usually at the plush Solmar Suites, our group of 8 was picked up from Siesta Suites around 1:30 pm and taken to the Solmar V, an older boat with lots of wood, even on the dive deck benches. The layout is efficient considering there are 22 guests plus staff. It was a full boat with 22 divers, including our celebrity photographers, Bonnie Pelnar and Marty Snyderman. We were assigned our tank positions and cabins and got busy unpacking and setting up our dive gear. The Solmar V left the dock about 3:30 p.m. and motored for the next 23 hours in slightly choppy seas to San Benedicto. The boat has three levels: the sun deck, half of which is shaded by a large tarp, the main deck, with the galley, dining area, and dive deck, and the cabins below. The aft cabins are slightly larger and more stable in rough seas, but also noisy, with a nasty vibration — several of us tried to drown out the noise with earplugs, but this is something that needs to be fixed. The forward cabins were much less noisy, with no vibration, but the two guests in the bow cabin complained about the noisy anchor. Each cabin had a tiny sink and a combination commode/shower. We got used to showering while sort of straddling the commode, although tall people might have a problem. A few

people never took a shower in their cabin, preferring to use one of the two showers on the dive deck — the water was warm, but not hot enough for me. There is also a regular bathroom (no shower) just inside from the dive deck. Walking in from the dive deck, the bathroom is on the right; on the left is a small “library” where the charging station, a computer for email, and the books, DVDs, and videos are kept. Continuing on into the dining area are four booths that can hold four to five people and four small elevated tables, each with 2 bar stools and a green library lamp. There is a huge flat screen TV in this area. At the far end, just before the galley was a small self-serve bar area, with ice and push-button soda. Everyone pulled out their laptops and worked on their digital photos between dives and each night. Every outlet on the boat was being used by some type of electrical gadget! Before each meal, everything on the tables had to be unplugged and moved. Meals were very good. Breakfast started out with a buffet of cold cereal, juice, and coffee. Pepe came around with a plate showing us the available hot meal. Lunch was a hot sit-down meal beginning with soup, and supper was salad, entrée, dessert, and a choice of red or white wine. There were always cookies or left over desserts sitting out. Soda, wine, and beer were included in the price. The dive deck is spacious. There are 11 stations on each side of the boat, with the camera table in the middle, which got pretty crowded with all the cameras and cases. Each diver had a large plastic bin to keep personal dive gear organized under their seat. Wetsuits were hung on a bar somewhat toward the bow; the 3 people who got assigned to that area always had wetsuits flapping in their faces, or people trying to squeeze between them and the

wetsuits to get to the pangas. The pangas were kept out of the way on the upper deck during the crossing and at night. They were lowered each morning and the crew loaded our tanks and weights. Between dives the tanks were filled on the pangas and a crew member would check the Nitrox mix while the divers watched. Right before each dive the photographers handed their cameras to the boat driver. Keep your camera lens cap on, as the cameras were nestled between the sides of the panga, the ladder and the driver's feet! Each of the 2 pangas carried 11 divers plus two divemasters and the panga driver. We rolled off simultaneously and then dashed back to the panga for cameras before heading down. We followed one dive guide and the other took up the rear position, making sure we didn't either wander or float off. When we did, usually following the hammerheads, our guide led us back to where we were supposed to be. Our first "check-out" dive was shortly after arriving at San Benedicto Island, at Fondadero, where we saw one manta and a hole full of lobsters. The next day we did four more dives at San Benedicto, one at the Boiler, and three at El Canon. We did see two mantas at the Boiler, but the visibility was unusually poor — this is where they usually see the mantas in large numbers doing their feeding loops. The first dive at the Canyon, done off the main boat, was also very poor visibility, but the next dive was a little clearer and we saw several sharks and a giant manta. There were also some inquisitive silky sharks hanging out under the boat. We were psyched for another dive there, but the boat's anchor dragged and we ended up going by panga and not seeing much of anything. That night we made the crossing to the island of Socorro. The local government officials came aboard

to inspect the boat while we were eating breakfast. We did three dives at Socorro that day and saw hammerheads, white-tips, dolphins, Galapagos shark, tuna, silkies, moray eels, and numerous smaller fish. Then it was another overnight crossing to Roca Partida, or Split Rock. We spent three days diving Split Rock. Each group of divers started off at opposite ends of the rock, but usually passed each other or merged at some point during the dive. Because of the deeper depths, we did three dives each day, lasting 50 minutes each, including the safety stop, except for a couple dives that went as long as 75 minutes because the mantas just wouldn't leave us alone! Once we all calmed down and stopped chasing them, one in particular would swim from person to person, eyeballing each diver in turn. The mantas would go up with us, until we were doing our safety stop with the mantas swimming around us. The other group saw a whale shark on one dive for a few minutes. So our last three days were spent going around Roca Partida one way, then the other, and each dive the rock looked the same, but the critters changed — silkies, Galapagos sharks, hammerheads, tuna, mantas, blue runners, mobulas, and more mantas. Bill and I got in the middle of a bait-ball at one point, and got some exciting photos when the silkies began joining us. But when the third silky arrived and started bumping us, we decided it was time to leave. We did spend one dive doing nothing but swimming against the current for 35 minutes, not seeing much, which was exhausting. Our guide apologized and explained he was trying to find a whale shark, but after that he kept us to a more leisurely pace; there was plenty to see without hoping for the elusive Mr. Big. We were given a choice to go back to San

Benedicto to try our luck again at the Boiler, or stay the third day at Roak Partida. Upon the crew's advice we stayed and were satisfied. This meant 30 hours crossing back to port, but one less night doing a crossing. It also meant our last dinner was on the boat instead of in Cabo San Lucas. The crossing was actually quite smooth and we got into port in time for some bar-hopping before hitting the sack and flying out the next morning.

Solmar V, March 2007 David Benson (davebenso1@msn.com), Colorado Springs, CO. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 72 F, calm. Cabins were small, nice. I stand only just 6' and with my feet on the wall at the foot of my bunk, my hair was on the other wall. We had one fellow who could not turn over in his upper bunk as his shoulders were too wide and would hit the ceiling. Food was quite good and plentiful. Pedro had been advised of my allergy and made separate dishes. Entire staff tried to be helpful. I was able to photograph 3 species of shark (reef, white tip, silver tip, Galapagos — some also were able to photograph scalloped hammer). We had encounter with an 18-foot friendly manta on one dive and a pair of 14-foot mantas on another. Another dive with a single manta. Mantas all stayed around. Two pods of dolphins on one dive that were close enough to get some good shots but they were not interested in us, just playing in the same water. Any dive where whale song is vibrating through your body has to be called a good dive and we had two or three of those, but never saw a whale underwater. Camera table was crowded as we had several "Pros" aboard with several cameras each, but it worked. Rinse tank provided. Cameras taken from divers reboarding boat and given quick dunk in camera tank.

Solmar V, March 2007, Peggy and William Goldberg (pgimages@atlantic.net), Citra, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, choppy, surge, currents. We dove 250 miles southwest of Cabo San Lucas. They dive 3 of the islands — San Benedicto, Roca Partida, and Socorro. The Solmar V office arranged for everything from the pickup at the airport to our hotel — which was simple, clean, and inexpensive — to picking us up at the hotel to get to the boat. They took us back to the hotel after the trip and arranged for the shuttle to the airport. The rooms on the boat are small — the bottom double bed for my husband and me was long enough (we're tall), but difficult to get out of because of a protruding wall. The top bunk, a single where we stored our clothes, etc. We heard from other passengers that they had trouble turning over in the top bunk, especially if they were broad-shouldered. The food was fantastic, and as we did not night dive (because of currents and sharks), wine was served with dinner. We dove 4 times per day on a rigid schedule as they had to dive from the pangas (Zodiacs). There were 2 pangas in the water at all times — 2 groups of divers — so we really didn't run into the other group much. Expect typical volcanic seamounts — no soft corals, few hard corals and encrusting sponges — so there is not as much color — currents, surges, can be strong and change unexpectedly (I was at 60 feet and suddenly found myself at 95 feet, and we only had to deploy our safety sausages once), but there are lots of indigenous tropical fish, moray eels, lobsters, schools of jacks, tuna, wahoo, humphead hogfish, and 20-foot manta rays, sharks (we saw Galapagos, silver-tipped, hammerheads, and whitetipped) and dolphins, humpbacked whales and

their babies! We heard the whale song on most dives. We were treated to their breaching, skyhopping, tail slapping, right by the boat all day! We saw the mantas, sharks, and dolphins on every dive. The pangas would take us near the whales for possible snorkeling encounters, but the mothers were protective of the babies so we had to just enjoy the experience on the water with them. The diving is high energy — you must be comfortable with changing strong currents, and doing your safety stop in a current in the blue in thousands of feet of water, waiting to be picked up (with the hammerheads and the whales). The trip was 9 days — the crossing to the Socorros is between 26 and 30 hours. Cabo San Lucas is a tourist town of resorts, shopping and spring breakers — a day there for us was enough to see everything and take a small boat out to the arch, sea lions and remote beach at Land's End. The Solmar V provided a large camera table. There was no specific charging station, so you could charge at any outlet. They had 2 big camera rinse tanks and the crew was good about handling your equipment after the dive. Because we dove from Pangas, the cameras were set on the floor until we got back to the big boat. We only made a few dives directly from the boat. They have a computer on board to download your photos. Bring your own CDs/DVDs.

Sea of Cortez

Solmar V, October 2006, Russ Lido (rlido@comcast.net), Sterling Hts., MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm, choppy, no currents. We did the Sea of Cortez leg October 22-29, 2006. You fly into Los Cabos, Mexico, and board the ship at the town marina. We arrived a day early and enjoyed some of the local cuisine. We

stayed at the new Best Western, a very nice motel for the money, and the boat will pick you up there. We were lucky to dive at all because of a late-season hurricane in the area. The Solmar V is well maintained. The cabins were very tight but they had their own head and shower. The ship's new engines are still louder than other live-aboards we've been on. Bring earplugs. The crew, food and other passengers made up for the inconvenience. Diving is done from Zodiacs, which can get crowded. Most of the dive sites had an abundance of small tropical fish and many moray and spotted eels, lobsters and crab, plus a few turtles. Diving with the sea lions was one of the highlights of the trip. They were even more friendly than ones on our Galapagos trip. We couldn't do some sites because of the bad weather. Went whale shark hunting one morning but didn't spot any. The ship didn't take credit cards, so tipping the crew and buying nitrox were difficult; new owners need to fix this problem.

UNITED STATES

California

Catalina Island

Bottom Scratcher, August 2006, Doug King (dking10982@aol.com), Santa Fe Springs, CA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 25 to 30 Feet. Water: 65 to 70 F, calm. The weather was good. I have seen better vis here than what we had. Boat is tight as far as room. More food than you can eat. Boat is real slow. Boat has a small boat that is in the water; seems to be more trouble than it is worth.