

conditions and helpful staff made my photo and video setup and cleanup experiences enjoyable.

MICRONESIA

Palau

Palau Aggressor, November 2006, Tom Dwyer (tdwyer@bigplanet.com), Kailua, HI. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. We were a very experienced group of divers led by Orbit Marine in Bridgeport, CT. The crew was great, they went the extra mile to accommodate us in every way. They were very professional and friendly. The diving was very good and the conditions were spectacular.

Palau Aggressor II, November 2006, Bill Shepherd (Chorsejbs@aol.com), Satellite Beach, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 200 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Capt Mike and his crew easily set the example for live-aboards in the Pacific. Staff members are professional, dedicated, and keep customer service foremost. Divers are provided with EPIRBs, alerts and sausages if needed. Rooms are spacious, with ample storage space, and are well maintained throughout the week. Food is plentiful and tasty. Snacks are served following morning and afternoon dives, along with local fruits. A unique feature of the boat is the skiff used as the platform for all diving. It is housed on a hydraulic lift that enables divers to enter and leave it from the dive deck, and gear is maintained by the crew on the skiff during the entire week. Effortless diving sure to spoil the most hardened diver. The Aggressor visits a variety of sites and modifies the schedule to

accommodate requests for specific sites and types of dives. The local knowledge and experiences of the divemasters ensures that unique fish and coral are located and identified.

Palau Aggressor II, January 2007, Mike Traylor (borderhart2@hotmail.com), EL Paso, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, currents. The best diving on the best live-aboard I've been on. Always exciting diving and friendly (Capital F) boat crew. The only drawback is the long flight there from the States.

Palau Aggressor, January 2007, Brian Verbonac (verbonac@sympatico.ca), Huntsville, On. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Dive operation, boat, crew, and dive masters second to none. Safety exemplary; briefings are on time, relevant and accurate, divers are equipped with GPS units, two dive masters are on all dives but let you dive your dive. This boat has a large dive skiff that operates at the back of the main boat and is raised hydraulically from the water level up to the back of boat. All dive gear is kept and stored on the skiff and all refills are via long hoses from the compressor. After you're set up, the only item(s) you have to remove from the skiff are your camera and wet suit. Your spot on the skiff is yours for the week. Amazing comfort and convenience. This part of the world has everything ... walls, sharks, corals, sharks, small fish, large fish, sharks, drift dives, turtles, barracuda, did I mention sharks? WWII landing area with submerged vehicles and shells. The list of things to see never ends. Hooking in on the Blue Corner and Peleliu Corner are not to be missed. We were on a night dive to Matts Wall, and there is a resident star fish that has to be four feet across! Food: hot, plenti-

ful and varied. Excellent cooks who enjoy their work. Cinemaphotography is provided by dive master, who manages to capture many varied situations throughout the week for presentation at weeks end. Captain Mike and Amanda two run a fantastic ship and we'll never forget your hospitality, enthusiasm and total professionalism.

Palau Aggressor, June 2007, Michael Foust, Ph.D., Santa Ana, CA. Experience: 325 dives. Vis: 100 feet. Water: 83F, calm and flat, strong currents. First class service, food accommodations. Beautiful topside and underneath. lue Corner didn't live up to billing, but overall was great. Appreciated culture, water visibility.

Truk

SS Thorfinn, February 2007, Ronald Dion (rondion1@juno.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, choppy. My wife and I are in our 60s and scuba dive off live-aboard boats up to 8 times a year. I have wanted to dive the WWII wrecks of Truk and the idea of a big (170 ft.) steam-powered live-aboard sounded great. It is a long and difficult trip to Truk, but we held up well to spend two nights at the Blue Lagoon resort before boarding the "Thorfinn," a 50-year-old steamboat. Truk is a poor, dirty, backward country. Our first hint that things might not going smooth came when we were awakened by the crew from the "Thorfinn" wondering why we were not ready to board. They had sail dates all mixed up as revealed by our paper work, so we became the only guests on the boat. Captain Lance was quite nice as he showed us some "Thorfinn" features. He informed us that the water maker was not working properly and insisted

that the water was fine to drink, it just tasted bad and that parts should be in a few days. We later learned that boat has had bad – salty —water for a long time. The water was used in tea and coffee and food and it all tasted so. Drinking bottled water in the lounge was a surprise, as the bottle had been filled from the tap and was just as bad. The water made me ill on the third day. Consider that the entire country and all the boats dump their waste into the lagoon. The safety of the water was much in doubt, in spite of Captain Higgs' assurances. At last some bottled water was brought aboard, and diet coke was brought aboard; all was kept locked up and given out a bottle at a time. Our cabin was large and well laid out, but the air conditioner never was cool enough. The captain, by now a bit cranky, said the European guests liked the cabins warm and never explained why we Americans had to suffer. One of the selling features of the boat is a huge plasma TV in the lounge for movies and dive pictures. This, of course, was broken the entire trip. The hot tub worked but was filled with raw sea water. Incredibly, there is no dive deck on this boat. One has to put on equipment and wet suits in the skiffs, where all the gear is never dry as the crew puts it into small under-seat lockers that have bilge water running through them. Getting into the skiff is never easy but worse in rough weather, climbing down a narrow ladder on the side of the boat. Then we suited up as the boat bounced around. We were on the boat 7 days (we paid for 12 but just had enough after 7. During the 7 days the boat moved once to get fuel. It takes 2 hours to get up steam. The docking at the fuel dock was a carnival with lines breaking, the captain yelling at the crew and the boat crashing into the dock, leaving a 25-foot black mark on the

boat. After fueling, the boat was moved a few miles, anchored, and stayed for 7 days. No steam till the last day. The 70-year-old captain lives on this boat with his 24-year-old native wife and their 2 young kids, 2 and 4. The rest of the crew of 22 seem to be related to the wife and most are not trained. Two were fired for stealing on the 3rd day. The kids are all over the place and never wear life jackets. The 4-year-old climbs all over the skiff and goes to dive sites in rough weather without a life jacket. Then there is the food. As bad as it can get. We are vegetarians and were told when we booked that we would have all the food we needed. In fact, vegetables were not to be had. Grease was the byword, no buffet-style, small portions with the captain sitting there just waiting for someone to complain. We were made fun of by this jerk who by now had the "Bligh Syndrome." Now we should talk about the diving. Chuuk "Truk" has the world's best wreck diving, no doubt. Diving from the "Thorfinn" is, strange to say, the least. Our first dive briefing was by the captain as there was no dive director, just him. We were told that there was nitrox available, but, the first dive would be as deep as 160 feet, well below nitrox limits (for us 105 feet). Captain Higgs said that these were not decompression dives but we should follow his safety stop rules. There were many dives thereafter well below PADI recreational limits, over the next six days. Many of these dives were, of course, decompression dives. I refused to dive that deep as I am 67 and want Nitrox for repetitive diving. One day they were out of nitrox and at times they used tanks for nitrox where the nitrox label was worn off. The tanks in general were in scuffed shape, looking old. The nitrox did test well, however. In general, the entire

"Thorfinn" experience was so bad that it sounds like fiction but this essay is the truth.

Truk Odyssey, November 2006, Gregg Gaylord (gregg1954@aol.com), Sheboygan, WI. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. Plane departed Guam and turned around due to a mechanical problem. Fortunately, there was a spare part. Flights to Chuuk are not every day so a major problem could mean not getting to Chuuk, but we had no real problem (1-1/2 hour delay in arrival). Odyssey captain Len and crew met us at the airport and got all of us to the bus and then to the boat without a hitch. It was after midnight, so we all went to sleep after a brief intro and some minor equipment setup. Setting up gear wasn't a problem the next morning. The dive guides, crew, captain, and, of course, Kara, were all excellent. The accommodations were the best I've seen on a live-aboard, including bed, cabin, dive deck, availability of equipment, willingness of crew to help, etc. The wrecks at Truk are covered with soft corals and lots of critters, and the dive guides were superb at guiding us through the corridors of the wrecks and helping us to see the history of these sunken ships from Japan circa WWII. We were fortunate enough to be able to see a shark feed (something I didn't think I'd like, but ended up loving), and the final day of the trip we did a land tour of one of the islands arranged through the Blue Lagoon Hotel. The dive conditions were flat and easy ... ideal for this type of diving. The night dives were interesting and colorful.

Truk Odyssey, December 2006, Watt Hinson (whinson@sbcglobal.net), Bay City, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F,

choppy, no currents. Capt. Nick and crew were fantastic. We dove 12 wrecks; 11 ships and the Betty Bomber. The crew were available for guided dives, but we could dive on our own. Dive briefings before each wreck were informative and complete; including wreck history, current conditions and points of interest. The divers were experienced with the exception of one. The crew went out of their way to make her week interesting. The wrecks are still in good condition, but time is taking its toll. If you haven't made this trip, you should before the wrecks deteriorate. Did a land tour the last day, but frankly, it wasn't worth it.

Truk Odyssey, January 2007, Jeanne and Bill Downey (travelexpert@comcast.net), Baden, PA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, choppy, no currents. Our fifth trip to Chuuk! Not only did we have a great bunch of divers, the crew was excellent. My husband and I were diving double tanks so we could spend more time on the wrecks; once the crew realized how competent the whole gang were, they allowed everyone who wanted to do decompression dives on two of the deeper wrecks, the Amagisan and the San Francisco. Those who didn't feel comfortable diving to 170' didn't miss any dives, though — as soon as the deep divers were back aboard, the Odyssey headed for a shallower site for those who sat out the deep dive. The crew gets A+ for their willingness to accommodate us in all ways. There were five dive guides so everyone who wanted a personal tour to the engine rooms was able to schedule it. The shark dive was well-run, and we saw some great action. Nick, previously a dive guide/instructor on the boat, is now the personable captain. Guide Madison is still there as well as

the cook, Emeren, who easily accommodated food allergies and preferences. Given a choice the last night of eating at the Blue Lagoon or leftovers on the boat, no one would leave! Owner Lenny was on board part of the week, working hard putting in a new water system, which worked like a champ — plenty of hot water, even if you were the last one taking a shower! The trade winds started off strong, causing the boat to swing on its anchor at a faster clip than normal — holding onto the deco bar was quite a ride and climbing up the ladder could be interesting. Towards the middle of the week the winds settled down to their normal velocity.

Truk Odyssey, April 2007, Tripp Jones MD (Tjones@sc.rr.com), Columbia, SC. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, no currents. This was the second Wateree Dive Center, Columbia, SC trip on the Odyssey, the best live-aboard afloat. The crew is great and the diving is awesome. Continental Airlines' incompetence in Houston caused us to miss our connection to Guam so we lost two days of diving in Truk. They really acted as if they could give a rip since they are the only flight to Truk. We took the "island hopper" route from Honolulu to Truk and this is an awful "butt busting" flight. Continental was OK from LA onward, but Houston is a joke. The diving was fine. The weather was rainy, but the crew of the Odyssey was superb. The corals are awesome and small and large critters are everywhere. The wrecks show some deterioration, but this is expected since the attack occurred in February 1944. The water was warm (82-84 degrees) and the viz pretty good. The food on Odyssey was plentiful and varied. The accommodations are adequate. Nitrox is available, generally about a 30% mix,

and was consistent. There is adequate space for storage and the dive platform is large, with a warm-water shower also quite enjoyable when returning to the platform. Next time we may take another airline to Hawaii and then change to Continental. A stopover on the way home for a couple of days in Honolulu helps the “decompression time” in returning to the East Coast. It’s a long trip, but well worth the time and expense.

Truk Odyssey, June 2007, Robert Levine (njtautog@aol.com), English-town, NJ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The dive operation runs like a clock. You get up when you want and dive when you are ready. The pool is open 24/7. Dive masters were excellent. By the second day I was diving with no weight belt and no weights. 0 divers for the entire boat. Food was excellent. Breakfast was always made-to-order eggs, omelets. Rooms, showers were always spotless. Unlimited hot water. Briefings were excellent. There was always something in the dining room to eat or munch on between dives. I purchased dive slates of all the wrecks we dove and DVDs that Mike Gerken, the ships photographer, made (images from Truk Lagoon). Narrated slides show from 1944 to 2007. The sinking of the S.S. President Coolidge and, of course, the weeks video just for the memories. I am a New Jersey wreck diver and spearfisherman. It was not easy for me coming home empty-handed — with no prizes, with all that WWII stuff still down there for the taking. Well, I do have it on film. The wrecks and viz. were to (die) dive for. Little pun.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

FeBrina, March 2007, Nannette and Bill Van Antwerp (nannettev@gmail.com), Valencia, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 88 F, calm. Can you actually see too many ghost pipefish? After 10 days on the FeBrina with Alan Raabe, maybe the answer is indeed yes. We had originally booked the trip with Alan on the Star Dancer, but because there were only going to be four guests on the boat, we ended up on the smaller FeBrina. The FeBrina (named after iron and salt water) is a steel boat built in 1972. She is 72 feet long and has a 20-foot beam. The boat is stable and comfortable, but needs a bit of TLC. There are seven cabins, all with individual A/C and three with en-suite baths. We had the owners stateroom in the bow, which was nice with a comfortable double bed and separate toilet and shower areas. It was fairly roomy and had a small closet and a few shelves, but minimal storage for gear bags. The food was okay. There was plenty to eat but the choice was not terribly varied and the cooking was acceptable if bland and not interesting. The cooking was mostly western style with occasional local specialties, which were generally better. Wine and beer were available, and since we had gotten bumped from the Star Dancer, we got it at no cost along with complimentary Nitrox. The wine was generic Australian red, not bad at all. Meals were served in the main cabin, which is nice and quite spacious, but with no ability to show photos except on a TV hookup. There were minimal plugs for charging laptops or other gear that stayed inside, since the main charging station was on the dive deck. There is a nice library of underwater books and magazines and the crew kept everything neat and or-