

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-

derly. Tanks and BCs are kept in bench racks on the back of the dive deck. Each diver has a cubby for their mask, fins, booties, etc., and hangers are provided for wetsuits. There were not many places to sit to don wetsuits on the dive deck, so getting ready with a full boat might be a challenge. During the first two days, there were lots of little screw-ups like low O₂ in the Nitrox mix or partly filled tanks, but things improved greatly. Alan and the crew were outstanding, as was the diving. Our trip was to the south coast of New Britain, where they only run a few trips every year. The area has some nice reefs, but the best dives were in the sand or the muck. The trip left from Rabaul under the glowering auspices of the Tavurvur volcano where you could see house-sized rocks thrown into the air, and lots of ash everywhere. We began our diving in Waterfall Bay on coral bommies and white sand slopes and saw an assortment of nudibranchs and flatworms, soft coral cowries, squat lobsters, pipefish, upside-down jellyfish as well as a myriad of small crabs and shrimp plus a couple of octopus and cuttlefish. We moved to Lindenhaven where we did several dives on a silty sand slope and began to see ornate ghost pipefish everywhere. By the end of the trip we weren't even taking pictures of them, we saw so many. We also saw snake eels, dragonets, pipe horses, frogfish, orangutan crabs, blue boxer shrimp, quill worms, flatheads, stingfish, waspfish, file clams, mantis shrimps, cuttlefish, ribbon eels, twin spot gobies, sea moths, robust and halimeda ghost pipefish, plus lots of unusual nudis including a giant melibe. We dove a couple of gorgeous walls where we saw eagle rays, sharks, bumphead parrotfish, barracuda, leaf scorpionfish, porcelain crabs, garden eels and lots of fire darts, often

in big groups. We motored to Tavalu, which was primarily hard coral walls and slopes. There we saw a big wahoo, a turtle, cuttlefish, longnose hawkfish, squat lobsters, jawfish, batfish, flying gurnards, eels, porcelain crabs, clownfish, nudibranchs, and ghost pipefish. All the diving was from the back deck. There were at least two dive guides in the water on every dive and they worked hard to find interesting critters. Jose had particularly amazing eyes and was always finding really tiny critters everywhere she looked. We also hiked up from a village to a waterfall with a beautiful freshwater pool where we took a refreshing swim, well worth the hot trek through the jungle. Alan is a pioneer of PNG diving and one of the great characters of the diving world. He is full of colorful tales about the folks and the area. There are also lots of stories about Alan — ask him about riding down the street in a dinghy being pulled by a horse. UW Photography Comments: There are two large camera tables above the gear cubbies that were great to work on, but the compressed air fittings on both sides were broken. There is a good-sized rinse tank which the crew kept filled with clean fresh water. The crew handled the cameras with great care. There is a large charging station on the dive deck with both 110 V and 220 V outlets. Dry camera towels are provided throughout the day.

FeBrina, May 2007, Martha Kiser, Ft. Myers, FL. Experience: 3000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 85 to 86 F, calm and flat, occasional strong currents. The crew of the FeBrina is overall the best I have encountered in 30 years of diving. The kitchen staff faithfully accommodated all special dietary requests (with smiles) and the dive crew (in particular, Josie and Alfie) were enthusiastic and generous and amazingly good at critter-

spotting. They smilingly accommodated all dive needs and tried to anticipate them when possible.

FeBrina, July 2007, Jeffrey M Gerstein (jmgdsm@netscape.net), Sacramento, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. This was the second trip to PNG for my mother and me, organized by Uncommon Adventures in Southern CA. Initially booked on Peter Hughes boat which was in for repair and so changed to the FeBrina ... what luck. Mike Ball. The boat had 8 guests (could hold 12-14), AC and showers worked well, we had owners suite and cabin adjacent. The personal attention from the crew and captain, combined with the superlative diving found in PNG, made this an unforgettable trip. One could dive up to 5 times a day for 6.5 days on an 8-day trip from Walindi Plantation to Rabaul. Hugely diverse coral, fish, photo ops, you name it. We included trip to Highlands at Ambua Lodge on this trip, the year prior to Carraway Lodge on the Sepic, both a 'must do' if you are schlepping this far. This trip we started in Australia for a minke whale trip with Mike Ball. UW Photography Comments: plugs in rooms; bring adapter and converter if you need it, plenty of safe storage on dive deck and plugs.

MV Golden Dawn, December 2006, Janet and Bob Czapski (trips@dive-travelservices.com), Farmington Hills, MI.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 75 to 85 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. Craig DeWit runs a fantastic operation. The smallest live-aboard we've done but it is compact and extremely well-run. The food that comes out of that tiny kitchen is amazing! The crew was friendly and competent. Craig is a

consummate host! You feel like you're diving with a great friend! His sense of humor is wonderful and his dive briefings are the "briefest" in the world! This particular itinerary is not suitable for beginning divers, and he's used to dealing with experienced divers looking for a unique diving experience in a part of the world that's only accessible for a few weeks a year. To Craig's credit, he's extremely intent on preserving his underwater world. He only does trips to Eastern Fields when the weather is conducive to traveling there, but he also only dives each site for a maximum of one day — no matter how incredible the diving might be. Diver impact is minimal — 50 divers per year for each amazing dive site! He knows his sharks personally and keeps detailed logs on sightings, numbers, conditions, etc. His concern for preservation is evident. He guides all dives himself, sometimes with some of the crew to help spot unique critters, but the boat only holds 10 divers, so it's easy to follow him if you're on a specific "critter quest"! We dove sites that were breathtaking, to say the least. You are in the middle of nowhere! We traveled approximately 120 km from Port Moresby and never saw another boat, island, only sea birds! He uses GPS coordinates for his favorite spots. Lots of the dives can be done directly from the Golden Dawn, some are done from the inflatables. His ladder system is a little tricky, but it works and his crew is extremely helpful. We saw sea fans that were 20' tall and in amazing colors. The schools of fish — small, medium and large — were prolific. He does do a couple of shark dives that are quite interesting. The weather proved unseasonably windy toward the end of our 10-day charter, so we had an uncomfortable crossing back toward Port Moresby but got a chance to dive near the coast for a few days (much cooler

water) and included Suzie's Bommie — a purple rhinopia was the highlight there. The Golden Dawn's itineraries vary throughout the year; he will do custom itineraries upon request. UW Photography Comments: Cameras are stored in the salon when the boat is underway; on a small camera table on the dive deck during the day. Camera gear storage is at a premium. We used the tables in the salon to change lens, etc., and stored everything in cases under the tables in the salon.

MV Golden Dawn, January 2007, Matt and Ellen Tate (matt.tate@insightbb.com), Kokomo, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. This was our 48th live-aboard trip and it was the best. The boat was comfortable (max 10 divers). The crew outstanding (would give Ocean Rover a run). Food was varied and prepared properly. The weather allowed us to go beyond Eastern fields to the New Territories (50 miles west of Eastern Fields). All submerged reefs and atolls. The trip was 16 days so we were able to do exploratory diving in what will be known as the Unknown Territories (miles south of the New Territories). The shark action here was like it was 20-30 years ago. We believe that we were the first divers here (more than 100 miles from land). We saw grays, white tips, bulls, hammerheads, silver tips, and the rebreather folks saw a thresher! The coral was fresh and untouched — both hard and soft. The reef fish were countless and curious (except for one snapper that bit me on the back of the neck — ouch). The currents got a little hairy at times, so it wasn't for the meek.

MV Golden Dawn, July 2007, Diane Pogrant (dpogrant@hotmail.com), Fair Haven, NJ. Experience: 501-1000

dives. Vis: 2 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 83 F, calm, currents, no currents. This was my 5th trip to PNG in a 20-year span; twice on FeBrina, 3 times on Golden Dawn. I fear it may be my last. Had I not been there before, I could not have noticed the differences. While the diving is still good, it is no longer excellent. The long liners have been through, cleaning out food fish and sharks, destroying the reefs in the process. The Japanese have the locals fishing for them, further depleting the fish stocks. There were many fewer fish than in the past. Schools of medium to large fish are noticeably absent. We found a long net draped down the side of a previously pristine underwater bommie. Many algae eaters are gone; the reef shows signs of algae overgrowth. I remember more nudibranchs and invertebrates in the past. Some areas were still beautiful, but too many were empty-looking with ravaged coral. Eastern Fields (on the other side of PNG) is far enough away that it is still excellent. Air Nuigini makes every trip a trial of nerves and guts. They routinely cancel a flight or two every day, due to their aging fleet and lack of repairs. Getting on a particular flight with several days worth of people all trying to do the same thing requires nerves of steel and a brassy attitude. Even then, the flights don't necessarily go to the city they are supposed to. All five of the divers for this trip missed two full days of diving. Frustrating for crew and guests. Craig runs a tight ship, with everything in good repair. His crew is superb and accommodating, the food excellent. But with Air Nuigini's canceled flights and the long liners destroying the reefs, the dive business in PNG is being destroyed as well. Alas.

Star Dancer, November 2006, Ron Dion (rondion1@juno.com), San

Francisco, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F. This boat is a bit tired and on this 10-day trip there was no dive master and no first mate, causing some concern on my part. The captain was excellent, but the only person in charge, licensed person on board. The diving was excellent and the shore resort was ok but no air-conditioning in the rooms. It was hot.

Star Dancer, May 2007, Jim Ferman (jpferman@cs.com), Wickenburg, AZ.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. This was our second trip on the Star Dancer. Our itineraries included the Kimbe Bay area and Witu Islands, and from Walindi to Rabaul. Captain Peter set the relaxed tone on the boat, a confident captain with years of experience in the area. He had a sense of humor. We were met at the Hoskins Airport by the social/trip director of the boat, Jamie, a charming and humorous young woman who immediately made us feel much at home. After arriving at the Walindi Resort where the boat is based, we met up with the owners of the resort and the Star Dancer: Max Benjamin, his wife Cecile, and Alan Raabe, three of the nicest people who truly understand what customer care and service is all about. Max has done an incredible job of promoting and constantly upgrading his resort. Cecile is a woman I could talk to for hours, as she is knowledgeable about the history of World War II in Papua New Guinea. Alan Raabe is a charming host/Captain who is more of the hands-on expert when it comes to the boat management. His knowledge of the areas dive sites is amazing. The Star Dancer accommodates 16 divers in eight cabins. They were a nice size with a queen-sized bed, had plenty of storage space and included a nice-sized

bathroom with full-sized shower. The dive deck had ample space for dive gear and had a separate table for cameras and one for battery charging. Each diver kept the same station for the entire trip and it was at these different stations that their individual tanks were refilled after every dive. The topside sundeck is large and partially covered for those who want to skip a dive and snooze or read a book. The lounge/dining area was spacious and was made up of a number of separate tables so you could sit with a small group of fellow passengers and make new friends. The food was excellent, hot, and plentiful. Accommodations were made for the picky eater. The diversity of fish life ran the spectrum from plenty of small stuff for the macro-lover to silver-tip, white-tip and black-tip sharks and dolphins for the big creature enthusiast. My wife loves photographing nudibranchs and other macro life and was shown new creatures Strange animals such as the crocodile fish, Spanish dancer, scorpion fish, and leaf scorpionfish were everyday occurrences. The dive masters were all incredible at finding the small things that most divers never see. Pygmy seahorses are extremely hard to find, but this crew seemed to have radar. One of the dive deck personnel, Relvi, always had a bright smile on her face and whenever we would arrive back at the boat, she was there to lend a helping hand. After the first day or two, she knew which fins and which camera belonged to each diver and helped with both. The visibility on most dives was in the 80- to 100-foot range. Not much in the way of current. All dives were performed from the back of the ship, and all anchorages were environmentally friendly. We went on a separate day trip on each of the two itineraries. On the Witu Island trip we

went ashore and toured a local village. It was led by a local character, Dickie Doyle, who had lived on the island for a good portion of his life, having married a local woman. Visiting the village was like stepping back in time 50-100 years. No electricity or running water, but the locals were all friendly, happy and smiling. On the Rabaul trip we visited the ominous, smoking volcano that loomed over the port city. We also visited the caves and tunnels dug out of the solid rock hillsides by the Japanese during World War II.

Telita, May 2007, Jennifer Meriwether (jen@delux.com), Oakland, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 35 to 65 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, choppy. We were originally scheduled for 10 days on the Telita on a repositioning cruise from Alotau in Milne Bay to Tufi. We had so much fun on the boat that we ended up canceling our further land plans and staying for another 10-day repositioning cruise from Tufi to Walindi in Kimbe Bay. The new owner/captain of Telita, Paul Baker, is friendly and customer service oriented. His main concern is to make sure that his guests have the best possible dive trip. We had horrible weather for the first 10 days of the trip, including a cyclone in the Solomon Sea that caused rough conditions in Milne Bay, so Paul revised his plans to take us to sites that were more protected. The boat is comfortable, with 5 ensuite guest cabins. The bathrooms are quite large for a live-aboard with plenty of hot water and even seats in the downstairs cabin showers so that you can sit down and take a shower while the boat is moving (something we really appreciated in the rough seas we encountered). The boat has passive stabilizers that are lowered when at anchor to help minimize boat rocking. The food was tasty and filling, with

plenty of meat (fresh fish if we'd caught any that day), veggies, fresh fruit and wine with dinner. Lunches were always prepared meals, not cold sandwiches. Afternoon tea brought an assortment of treats including freshly baked scones, carrot cake, caramel peanut butter bars and yummy brownies. The dive deck is large and easy to move around in, with two hot showers and a really good swim-up ladder. Depending on the current, most of the dives either started from the boat and ended with a pickup in the Zodiac, or vice versa. Nitrox is available and all of the boat's mechanical systems were well-maintained. Except for a few muck sites in Milne Bay, most of the diving was on bommies that were a mile or more offshore. Our trip included lots of exploratory dives. Even on his established itineraries, he always tries to do at least one or two exploratory dives. Some sites had really great coral and/or gorgeous walls, others showed a large amount of damage from coral bleaching episodes, especially in Milne Bay, which had a really bad bleaching about 5 years ago. Despite Milne's reputation for muck-diving, we found the "critter" count to be rather low compared Indonesia. However, PNG has an abundance of fish large and small. Because the population of PNG is relatively small and the Asian fishing fleets have not yet fished it out, you get to see a complete ecosystem instead of seeing only smaller fish. We had at least 1-2 sharks on most dives, sometimes up to 10, mainly grey reefs with the occasional white tip, black tip and silvertip. We also saw grouper, snapper, mackerel, barracuda, dog tuna, Napoleon wrasses, bumpheads, turtles and rays (eagle, manta and stingray), making it a really good destination for those who like the big stuff. UW Photography Comments: large camera

worktable, rinse bucket on dive deck, 110/220 charging station.

PHILIPPINES

Expedition Fleet, Oceanic Explorer, May 2007, Gayle and Bob Bringas (robertbringas@msn.com), Gaston,

OR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Cabins A1 and A2 have more space than A3 and A4, because A1 and A2 do not have the storage that A3 and A4 have. A3 and A4 are next to the dining area. The dive deck is B deck. A Deck is split fore and aft. So, to get to the dining area from A1 or A2, you go down a set of stairs to B Deck, cross B Deck, and climb a set of stairs to the aft A Deck. Between Cabins A1 and A2 is the generator, so it was like having Magic Fingers in the bunk, without the quarters. Oceanic Explorer is a faster boat than the Stella Maris, another Expedition Fleet boat that made the same trip at the same time. Food was served buffet-style, typically Asian/Filipino cuisine, rarely any western dishes. Desert was usually fresh mangos. Snacks were usually store-bought cookies and crackers. Diving was done off of two skiffs. Crew always ready to give you a hand on and off. Dive guide gave briefings on the skiff, but it was generally limited to which way the current was running. Crew transferred gear on and off the skiffs, set up tanks, etc. A crew member analyzed Nitrox tanks while the diver observed, then the diver filled out the percentage and MOD in a notebook, with date and signature. Gear was left on the skiffs during the day, and taken aboard at night or during crossings. We had calm seas for the entire trip. The diving was good. Some rubble areas. Never had more than slight current on any dive site. Routinely saw

turtles, white-tip and reef sharks, lots of garden eels, big schools of big fish: Jacks, banner fish, spade fish, hump-head wrasse. Divemaster Danny led the dives, but wasn't inclined to point out much. Encountered some thermoclines, but water temperatures ranged from 84 to 87 degrees. Bob did 18 dives in the four dive days (with two night dives).

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Bilikiki, November 2006, Janet and Bob Czapski (trips@divetravelerservices.com), Farmington Hills, MI.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, surge, currents, no currents. Those who have difficulties with stairs, high steps in doorways, step-downs from cabins into hallways, will not enjoy this boat. The cabins were clean, bathrooms were tiny but adequate. Noise travels easily on the cabin deck level. Food was mediocre at best. We did 4 live-aboards back-to-back on this trip and we rated this food the poorest. Breakfasts were never hot, food selections were extremely limited. The fruits, however, were the best and most plentiful we've ever seen. The crew did the best they could with the ingredients on hand. The crew itself was competent but, shy. They were not introduced to the group upon arrival, but they wear their names on their shirts. Once you called them by name, they were a little more outgoing. Their strength was incredible! It was nothing to pick up two sets of gear and carry it easily into the tinnies! The tinny drivers were competent in handling cameras and dive gear prior to boarding via the small ladder at the rear of the tinny. We did a few dives directly off the back of the Bilikiki. This was the least "guided" diving that we've ever done