

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

on a live-aboard in an exotic location. One of the two cruise directors was in the water for every dive but they didn't go out of their way to point things out. There were less divers than usual. If you were on a full boat, it would be difficult to observe some of the unique critters with this type of guiding. We visited three carving villages during the 10-day trip. We also were taken to a lovely village that performed a fantastic sing sing for us. The musicians used PVC piping of various lengths/diameters to produce incredible music! The Solomon Islands wood carvers are among the world's best. I contacted the owners of Bilikiki Cruises with my concerns/comments upon return from the 6-week adventure and addressed all of the above issues with them. Their reaction was well, everyone else loves us, so I feel that our concerns were totally dismissed. I felt like since we had done 4 world-class live-aboards back to back, giving them an update of the comparisons would be of value to them. Apparently not. UW Photography Comments: The crew handled cameras wonderfully. They had a large camera table on the back deck for storing cameras during the day. The camera rinse tank was good. They do, however, move the cameras onto the salon floor during transits and small baskets were provided each diver for lens, batteries, etc., which were kept in the salon, not on the camera table. The charging area was in a nice room, but it was on the top deck, so lots of moving about was necessary for camera setup changes. That was inconvenient.

Bilikiki, April 2007, Linda and Ron Welf, Montara, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. We did 38 dives over 11 days. Nitrox was used by everyone. We were pleased with the diving because we only have 300 dives

to our history. Companions with over 1000 dives were bored. (Although they did seem highly enthusiastic over the many pygmy seahorses that were easily found.) Waters were calm, few waves, few currents, and diving was easy. We came back with 1350 photos. Mostly small stuff but also bumphead parrot fish, giant wrasse and schools of barracuda, jacks, snapper, and a profusion of small tropicals. Only a few rays and sharks. We liked stuff in the mangrove shallows, like banded archerfish, estuarine halfbeaks, pajama cardinal fish, bigmouth mackerel. Another favorite in the sand were the many signal gobies and crocodile flatheads. The boat is older, but OK. Twenty divers are divided into two aluminum tenders. The dive masters seemed a little burnt out. One dive master is assigned to lead two groups of ten. They do not wait for anyone. Dive master Monte was engaging, but his female companion seemed indifferent to customer interests. If you do not need a dive guide, then you will be fine. If you think you need one, take different trip. Air Pacific, a Fijian airline, had mechanical problems both going and returning. Since our flight was canceled due to mechanical problems, we were rerouted to Qantas, via Australia, and arrived a day late.

Bilikiki, April 2007, Peter Goltzen (goltzenp@hawaii.rr.com), Kailua-Kona, HI. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, calm, currents. My greatest disappointment — salon hot and stuffy, to get A/C, had to sequester in windowless stateroom. No heads on dive deck — had to go to one's cabin (and hope roommate wasn't using it). Weak Solomon Island government let Taiwan "vacuum clean" their fishery — so no large critters. Numerous other flaws. UWP: bring your own computer.

Bilikiki, June 2007, David Shem-Tov (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Meters. Water: 30 C, calm, currents, no currents. Although showing her age, the Bilikiki is a good live-aboard. Monty and Michelle head a capable and friendly crew and made an effort to please everyone. My party of four Europeans, having traveled a long way, had higher expectations of the diving. It was pleasant enough, but did not justify the expense and effort, with the seas fairly fished out. More spotting by the dive masters would make the relatively monotonous wall dives more enjoyable. Perhaps its time to train some local divemasters? Critter and coral diving was better for me in Indonesia. We enjoyed the company of Stan Waterman and Nancy McGhee, who hosted this trip. Thanks, too, for Bret Gilliam for arranging this for us. UW Photography Comments: Big, well-equipped camera room. Dedicated rinse tank. Experienced and careful crew.

Spirit of Solomons, April 2007, Ike (ikepharm@yahoo.com), West Linn, OR.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. I booked with Reef & Rainforest 6 months in advance. I became aware towards the time of the trip that there was only one other diver. Aghast, I thought my trip would be canceled. I was reassured by Reef & Rainforest that my trip was a go and there would be no scrimping to save fuel, etc. And it came to pass. I arrived in Honiara and

was met by Evan, boat rep, brought to ship where I met my fellow diver, an excellent diver from Switzerland. We had a choice of cabin and were treated like royalty by Kellie and Sam, the boat managers. I soon discovered that the A/C was kaput. Sam had the crew take his A/C out of his cabin and installed in my cabin. I have never been treated so well. The diving, overall, was fantastic. We could dive up to 5 times daily. I finished the 11 days with 44 dives. There was muck diving with dragonets, Mandarin fish, etc. Wall diving was great, with cuttle fish, sharks, great barracuda, rays ... and the parade kept coming. What made this trip so notable was the tinnies that took us back to mother ship after surfacing. There was no sitting in the sun waiting for other diver, as she exceeded my dive time of 60-75 minutes by 20 to 25 minutes. As Mel Brooks said, "It's good to be king." UW Photography Comments: Rinse tanks, large table on dive deck, lounge had charging stations and plenty of room

Spirit of Solomons, August 2007, George A. Bogard (awesomei@sbc-global.net), Rockwall, TX.

Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm and flat, choppy, slight current. I spent 10 great days. We dove 4 to 5 dives per day. The organization and service were fantastic. The diving, too, was superb. I took several thousand UW photos of everything from macro to sharks to wrecks. Sam, Kelly and the crew were most helpful.

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