

the safari group and the dive guide. Meals were well-prepared and plentiful, mostly Asian/Filipino cuisine. Apo Island is a marine reserve. Sanctuary fee is not included in the cost of the trip. No dive gloves allowed. This was some of the best diving on the trip. Slight current, 50- to 60-foot visibility, water temperatures 82-84 degrees. Lots of big schools of big fish (surgeon fish, banner fish, etc.). A turtle or two on every dive, ribbon eels. The only dive with strong current was at Coconut. One-and-a-half hours in calm seas from Apo Island to Siquijor Island (also a marine reserve and sanctuary fee is not included in the dive package). We spent two nights at the Coco Grove Resort. It's a beautiful resort spread over a large area. Two swimming pools. Grounds are lush, tropical vegetation, well-maintained. The cottages are set back from the beach, so you have garden views, not ocean views. Has electricity and hot/cold running water. All meals were served family-style for the safari group. Food was predominantly Asian/Filipino dishes. Meals were well-prepared and plentiful. Only three dives around Siquijor, as we made dives around Apo on the day we left for Siquijor Island and made a dive at Balicasag Island when we left Siquijor Island en route to Panglao Island. Visibility was 50 feet, slight current, water temperature was 81 to 83 degrees. We saw blue ribbon eel, snake eel, banded pipefish, ornate ghost pipefish, porcelain crabs, plus all the "usual stuff."

SOLOMON ISLANDS

While difficult to get to, the Solomons are classic jungle islands with beautiful reefs and excellent fish life.

Gizo Hotel, Uepi Island Resort, March 2006, Mark and Gini May (mvmay@comcast.net), Sandy, UT. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, choppy. The Solomons are rarely visited by Americans but a lot of Aussies and Kiwis visit. This was by far the best diving we have done in 22 years since certification. We stayed a week at the Gizo Hotel on the island of Gizo and a week at Uepi Island Resort on Morovo lagoon. The Gizo Hotel is very basic and makes a Motel 6 look lux. Uepi Island Resort was nice, but not as fancy as one would expect on Fiji or in Hawaii. The Solomon Islanders are great, though; they don't see many Americans so are very friendly and interested in us. The diving is fantastic; with over 900 islands, dive sites are everywhere. At Gizo we took off in the morning and had a dive, went to an uninhabited island for lunch and swimming, then went for our afternoon dive. One lunch was on Kennedy Island where JFK and crew swam after their PT boat was cut in two. WWII history is everywhere and we did our first wreck dives there on ships and a P-38 and a Hellcat.

TONGA

Dive Vava'u, The Moorings charter, August 2007, Mike Binnard, Belmont, CA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 76 F, no currents. Vava'u is a pretty ideal sailing environment. The weather was good, the navigation is easy, and the islands are great. Anchoring is easy, because the water is so clear and you can see exactly what you're doing. The only trouble we had was that VHF radio contact is a little less reliable than advertised. "Sailingbird's Guide to the Kingdom of Tonga" is the best refer-

ence book. Their charts and pictures are much more detailed and helpful than the guide from the Moorings. You can sail just about anywhere in Vava'u in 3 hours or less. And usually there is something interesting to stop and see on the way. We didn't learn until the end of the trip that "split provisioning" includes free resupply of food (if you return to the base to pick it up) and a Tongan Feast at a village. Provisioning was more expensive than shopping locally, but it's convenient. The Moorings were laid back and easy to deal with, but provide quick and good service. We had a few maintenance issues on our boat (missing cotter pin so the boom fell off once; engine needed a new starter motor), but guys came right out and fixed things right away. Lots of places had healthy and colorful coral. Not a whole lot of big fish, but much better than Kona or Bermuda. We were fine with 3/2 full suits. Several places had great snorkeling: "Coral Gardens" at Vakaeitu is the best snorkel site I've ever seen. The north side of Ava and the edge of the reef at Maninita (outside of the coral head on the NW side of the anchorage) were also great. Dive Vava'u was pretty much as perfect as possible for a dive operation. Paul and Karen are really great dive guides: good briefings, the right attitudes about ecology, lots of knowledge about the critters (from whales to fish to nudibranchs), and really good at pointing out little interesting things (orangutan crab, nudibranch, cleaner shrimp, Spanish dancer eggs, etc.). Rental equipment was great, and they definitely have the best dive boat in Vava'u. Good food, too. We did two days of whale-watching with Dive Vava'u. This is the real must-do activity in Vava'u. We booked 2 days because there's no guarantee that the weather or animals will cooperate. First day we saw

whales from the boat in the morning, but they were going someplace in a hurry. Middle of the day was slow with no sightings. Then we found another whale who settled down to sing. We jumped in the water and snorkeled over the singing whale. It was completely mind-blowing looking down through the blue to see the whale 40 feet down, while listening to the whale song. You can feel the vibrations in your chest and arms. Second day we spent an hour following a group of 4 whales who were fighting. It was surprising to see how agile the whales are, and to see their tactics: lifting each other out of the water, blowing bubbles to disguise their location, and hitting each other. At one point they were only 10 feet from the boat. Definitely not a time for us to go swimming. On other days, we saw whales from the sailboat, sometimes only 30-40 feet away. We often heard whales singing while snorkeling. Villages are neat and orderly, and we often saw Tongans doing construction projects. Of course they are friendly and cheerful, and love joking and teasing each other and us. Vava'u has a big variety of islands, from 800-foot cliffs to dense jungles to tiny sandy motus. It was a lot of fun to sail around and explore all of them. In Nukualofa, we did a taxi tour of the island to see the major sights in 3 hours. Visible damage from the November riots was minor and isolated. Interisland flights were punctual. We didn't catch any fish from our boat. But that's probably because we are clueless fishermen.

Happy Ha'apai Divers, Sandy Beach Resort, October 2006, Sandy Falen (skfalen@cox.net), Topeka, KS. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 74 F, choppy. Sandy Beach Resort is a gem — and a great value. The bungalows are solidly built

and well thought out, with plenty of storage, a roomy shower with plenty of hot water and good water pressure, and a mini-fridge. Each of the 12 cottages faces the beach, with the covered front porch only steps from the water's edge. Beach chairs are provided for each cottage, and bicycles are available at no charge. The beach is gorgeous, clean, loaded with seashells, and practically devoid of people, given the minimal number of travelers who make their way to Ha'apai. Food was excellent, with a generous breakfast that minimized the need for lunch (although snacks are available in the afternoon). Dinners were relatively "upscale," and a little on the pricey side at \$45/person, but they served the best lobster. Boris and Jürgen, owners of Sandy Beach, are friendly, efficient, and graciously accommodating. I did, however, find turtle shells and Tritan's trumpets decorating the walls to be disturbing, given that both are endangered and scarce in Tongan waters. Down the road, at the tip of the island, is Matafonua Lodge. It has the same ownership as Sandy Beach, but is a lower-priced alternative, with basic cabins, shared facilities, and an open-air, casual restaurant with a killer view of the sea. Managers Dave and Sally were warm and welcoming, and I enjoyed their food — and more than a couple Royal Bitters (one of Tonga's local brews). Happy Ha'apai Divers is located on-site at Sandy Beach, a short walk from my bungalow. The staff was fun and friendly, but the weather just wasn't cooperative. Tonga's islands are flat, and there is very little shelter from the wind — the diving is weather-sensitive here. For two days after my arrival, high winds prevented the dive boat from going out. I was able to do some shore diving (suiting up on my own front porch and walking

to the water's edge for an easy sand entry), and there was always something to see at the bommies offshore. The winds were still blowing on day three, and we only managed one boat dive. Because Tongan laws prohibit working on Sunday, the dive boat can't go out — although I was able to shore dive. Tonga has some beautiful reefs, and although they weren't as "fishy" as I would have hoped, the coral was generally lush and very healthy. Dives are not rushed, and I was able to freely dive my own profile, with most dives running more than an hour. The surface interval was "highly civilized," with hot coffee and tea, fruit, and cookies. The boat crew was fun and eager to please. When whales were sighted, the crew was happy to spend some time following and watching them. We attempted one in-water interaction, but mother and baby humpback kept their distance. Topside time was mostly spent reading, walking the beach, or visiting with my international "neighbors" (I was the only American there). I went to church on Sunday with Jürgen and several other guests, and thoroughly enjoyed the Tongan ceremony and the incredible music. The hotel staff and other local villagers put on a traditional singing/dancing ceremony one evening. I took an afternoon walk to the nearby village of Faleloa, where the friendly locals were more than happy to let me take their pictures. And an 11-km bike ride to Pangai provided exercise and beautiful scenery the day before I headed home. I flew Air Pacific from LAX, via Nadi, Fiji, and on to Nuku'alofa (Tonga's capital), for an overnight stop before a short and scenic morning flight to Ha'apai. Let Boris at Sandy Beach arrange your domestic air and overnight hotel, if required. For my 7-hour layover in Nadi, I got a dayroom at Raffles Gateway Hotel, right next to

the airport. Get some Tongan currency before catching your domestic flight (there is a currency exchange counter in the Nadi airport). While Sandy Beach and Happy Ha'apai Divers will take your credit card, you'll need cash to pay for your domestic flight (approximately \$140 USD round-trip), for any food and drink at Matafonua Lodge, and for your Tongan departure tax. While I was disappointed not to have gotten in more dives, I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Ha'apai, and for a South Pacific destination, Tonga is a steal. On Foa Island, there is no shopping and no nightlife.

CENTRAL AND WESTERN PACIFIC LIVE-ABOARDS

Clipper Odyssey, November 2006, Erwin P. Staller, Hauppauge, NY. The American Museum of Natural History and the Harvard Museum of Natural History put the trip together with Zegrahm Expeditions. The trip incorporated part of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. In addition to divers and snorkelers, the trip was tailored to birders, naturalists as well as people interested in native cultures. The ship held 100 passengers. We had a total of 9 dives, of which I did 7. There were 2 wreck dives and 1 shore dive, as well as many other enjoyable dives. One wreck dive explored the Toa Maru, a Japanese Passenger Cargo Transport Ship, which was sunk by the U.S. Air Force during World War II. The ship is encrusted with coral and contains various artifacts including two-person armored tanks. The second wreck dive was on the S.S. President Coolidge, which was a steamship that was converted into a troop ship, which carried thousands of

American troops. The ship ran into an American mine, and the captain had the foresight to run it onto the shore. With the exception of 2 seamen, all of the troops were evacuated, and the ship slowly filled with water and sank. One of these dives went to a depth of 130 feet and actually went into the ship. A second dive went to 100 feet, in which I participated. Both of these dives were led by local divers, headed by an Australian dive master. There were 17 divers. The dives were led by 3 dive masters — a husband and wife team, Thomas and Natalia Baechtold, and Jeff Gneiser. Two Zodiacs were loaded with all our equipment. We were all assisted in gearing up for a back roll into the water. I, an 85+ year old diver, required and received excellent assistance both on and in the water. The dives were colorful, mostly tropical fish. There were no large fish to be sighted, and the area seems to be free of sharks. Only one 5 foot reef shark was spotted amongst all the dives. There were some very nice and colorful hard and soft coral as well as some unusual tabletop formations. Daily lectures were offered to those who wanted to attend, which dealt with the local birds, flora and fauna. These lectures were very interesting and educational.

National Geographic Endeavor, April 2006, Alan Dean Foster. Experience: 700+ dives. Henderson Island. Viz 60-unlimited, water 81. Rarely visited World Heritage site, part of the British Pitcairn administrative district that also includes Ducie and Oeno islands. Never mined for guano. Four endemic bird species. High cliffs make occasional landing possible only on single white sand beach, on north of island. Water temp. 81 degrees. Shallow dives reveal lots of coral rubble from storm damage near center of north shore. Second dive