

boat is set up with nitrox, and an instructor in our group will be offering a nitrox certification course during the trip.

The cost is \$189 per day for 12 days of unlimited diving. Airfare, of course, is extra — at current prices, \$1,250 to \$1,800 from JFK airport in New York. We expect to go aboard the boat on June 16 and return to

port June 28, 1995. This schedule is not yet final and is subject to change, depending on airline connections.

After a 4- to 5-day crossing from Elat, the boat will pick us up at the port of Mits'iwa (Massawa) in Eritrea. We will fly into the capital city, Asmara, then travel by bus to Mits'iwa, a 3-hour trip. Due to airline

connections, an overnight layover is possible on the outbound leg, possibly at Cairo or Asmara, providing an opportunity for extended trips to the pyramids or other sites.

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Socorro, South of Cabo

Where the Wild Things Are

About 7 or 8 years ago, I overheard longtime Houston dive travel guru Kenny Young talking to someone at DEMA. Kenny had a T-shirt for every occasion, even one with a tuxedo printed on it for formal wear. This time Kenny was wearing his scuba shirt: tank printed on the back, BC and regulator on the front. He was talking about his recent trip to Socorro Island. Although the schooling hammerheads and large mantas were becoming less predictable on dive trips in Baja, this was an island where the wild things were. It was a bit of a steam south of the Cabo San Lucas to get there (22 hours) and the boats were sleep-on-the-deck types, but the big creatures were there and Kenny was hot to go back. About this time the Okeanos Aggressor moved to Cocos Island, whose big creatures stole Socorro's thunder in this hemisphere. But now a new luxury liveaboard is offering trips to Socorro. Are the wild things still there?

It had been nearly 9 years since I last dived in the lower Sea of Cortez, so when one of my dive buddies said he was interested in diving that area, I decided to look into putting

together a live-aboard dive vacation. My previous trip was aboard the *Baja Explorador*, but since that boat is no longer in service, my first thought was to use the *Don Jose*; like the *Baja Explorador*, it's chartered through Baja Expeditions and sails from La Paz, Mexico.

Then I heard about a luxury boat, based in Cabo San Lucas, that visited the same sites as the *Don Jose* but stopped at a number of far south locations: the *Solmar V*. I booked it.

Dive? Later, I'm Luxuriating

The *Solmar V* is owned by the people who own the luxury Solmar hotel in Cabo. Although designed for long-range sport fishing trips, the 112-foot U.S.-built boat has been used mostly for whale watching and dive trips since it was put in service in 1993.

Spartan it's not. The main salon resembles a fine San Francisco restaurant, with leather seats, brass rails, and

accent lights bordering the table edges. Lighted etched-glass murals of marlins, dorados, and sailfish — commissioned for \$3,000 each — glow softly beneath the ceiling of padded ostrich hide and stained-glass lights. Each of the 12 staterooms, all below deck, has at least one porthole for natural light; each is equipped with one double bed and one single bed, except for rooms 201 and 203, which have two single beds. (The goal was to have two people per room, 24 guests in all; however, the operators decided to limit rooms 201 and 203 to one person each after this trip.) Room 403 is the "crown jewel" — it even has a refrigerator. Each stateroom has a TV and a VCR (nice touch, but it seemed to encourage people to retreat to their cabins after dinner rather than socializing in the salon). It was my first live-aboard with a shower, toilet, and sink in each cabin.

The *Solmar V* was set up for sport fishing; the owners are still learning that divers' needs are a bit different. We had to keep our gear in our dive bags under large benches lining the perimeter of the rear deck. It didn't prove to be much of a problem, as the deck area is large, but I was told that storage bins for equipment are on order. A rack is also being fabricated for drying wetsuits

and skins between dives. Better camera etiquette needs to be stressed on future trips; a large camera table in the center of the rear deck was crowded with fins, masks, and clothes, leaving very little space for cameras. Up top, the sun deck was just that — sunny. A partial shade would add a little protection for those wanting to be on deck but not on the dive deck. Apparently sport fishermen (fisherpeople) don't care to be topside unless they have a line in the water.

The food was good, my only criticism being that lighter fare would have been more appropriate for this group. Most of us (typical Californians all) would have preferred more fish and chicken and less beef. There was always plenty of beer (no charge), but our group drank the boat dry of wine in 4 days.

The water supply was as advertised — unlimited. If you're still not sure what a Navy shower is, this boat is for you.

Diving is coordinated and supervised by personnel from Amigos del Mar, one of the oldest dive shops in Cabo. During our week, the dive shop provided three divemasters, one being the owner, Jose-Luis.

The rule for diving was to take a buddy with you and have as much fun as possible — no depth restrictions or time limits in the water. The three divemasters gave a good briefing at each new site and were always at hand in case one of the few inexperienced divers wanted a private escort. Two chase boats picked up and dropped off divers; a third boat stood ready for emergencies.

Shoulda Been Here Last Month

Water temperature averaged 80°F during the first week of

August, but below 50 feet it sometimes dropped to the low 70s. Visibility was a big disappointment, never better than 50–60 feet for the entire week, sometimes as low as 15 feet. On a variation of the theme "You should have been here last week," visibility was said to have been 90–100 feet in July.

Cabo Pulmo reef, which provided the best vis on our first day out of port, was wall-to-wall sting rays, tuna, jacks, and small pelagics; a night dive here was even more amazing. However, the seamount, El Bajo, did not provide the wild action of hammerheads and mantas that I had seen here a few years ago. Visibility was no better than 20–30 feet, but people did see "a" manta and "a" hammerhead. I wondered if there weren't more out there in the murk. I was able to get within 8 feet of a 7- to 8-foot manta for a photo.

Gordo Banks, known for its strong currents and its depths starting at 100 feet, was, we were told, where divers had been spotting whale sharks,

mantas, and hammerheads. Not us; again, only a hammerhead here and a manta there, maybe others just out of sight beyond 30 feet. I found a nice rock to hang onto and watched school after school of tuna, jacks, and other 20- to 40-pound fish ride the current in pursuit of dinner.

It was not uncommon to see porpoises on the surface. One group of divers was dropped off in the path of these beautiful animals to watch them pass under water.

Obviously there are no guarantees in diving, and everyone understood that. We could have had better visibility, but we saw enough big stuff to convince us that we should book the boat for Socorro Island in December 1995. Judging from Stan Waterman's film footage, Socorro may be where the wild things are.

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Flotsam & Jetsam

Scratch Sangalakki, Chalk Up Derawan Island

Dear Editor:

The note about Borneo Divers being closed down on Sangalakki is unfortunately true. However, divers can still go to Sangalakki and barely explored Kakaban Island (not to mention Maratua, Derawan, and other islands in the area).

Derawan Island Resort is nearing completion and in the soft opening stage (that is, don't expect great food yet). The formal opening is set for January 1995.

I went in July 1994 and found brand new Scubapro gear, fast boats (though not too great in rough seas), comfortable bungalow accommodations, and helpful, friendly staff. They