

engineer, Tony, gave us cooler cabins at night. Although promised by the agent at See & Sea, there was no ladder on the RIB, so one woman had some difficulty climbing aboard. With her good nature and the strong backs of RIB operators Tony and Darren, she made it through the trip, albeit with some distinguishing black and blue marks. The See & Sea agent had also promised that underwater scooters would be available; one of our group left his at home, only to discover that the batteries on the *Quest's* scooters had long since perished. These were minor problems for our experienced group, easily dismissed with the ubiquitous Egyptian phrase "Inshallah" ("As God wills"). The divers in our group, most of whom had dived the Red Sea before, were unanimous in their praise for the Norwegian Captain and the all-English crew. All agreed that *Poseidon's Quest* was a 5-star boat with a 5-star crew providing 5-star diving.

Details

Poseidon's Quest is operated by Luxury Dive Charters, Whitefield Road, Bredbury, Stockport, Cheshire SK6, England, phone 061-430-6818, fax 061-430-7928. I booked through See & Sea Travel, San Francisco (800-348-9778 or 415-434-3400). The price for 12 days (11 nights, 11 diving days) was \$2,970. Round-trip airfare from the East Coast to Sharm el Sheik via Cairo was \$1,492. Airline scheduling necessitated two nights (one each way) in a Cairo hotel for another \$160 (plus meals).

For reasons of price and service, I booked the air and land legs with another travel agency. Wise readers will double-check recommendations for airline routing and ticket price as well as land accommodations. Cheaper and more

convenient air travel may be available. Depending on your budget and the security situation, you may wish to fit in a land trip to see the antiquities of Egypt. Consult an agency specializing in Egyptian travel and check out some guidebooks.

The Cairo airport is a madhouse. Ask your travel agent to ensure that you get escort service to expedite customs and immigration (and transfers, if you overnight in Cairo). The escort may be able to help with overweight baggage for the flight to Sharm el Sheik, but if you pack heavy, be prepared to fork over a few dollars.

Late summer is considered the best (although hottest) time to dive the Egyptian Red Sea. But it can be rough, and you'll need a wetsuit in the winter months. The boat has emergency spares, but no rental gear, so bring your own (plus repair kits and spares). You'll need an Egyptian visa from a consulate; allow time for it.

Cabin 5 is smaller, has a double bed, and would work for a couple. Cabins 3 and 4, off the salon, are the best. Cabins 1 and 2 are forward, have a steep stairway, and tend to be a bit warmer.

Kona Blend



My idea of Hawaii? If you're there, do it. Up until now, my itinerary would not have included more than 3 days of diving in Hawaii. I may have to reconsider after reading this report.

I just got back from Kona, and wow, what a trip. Lisa Choquette and Tom Shockley of Dive Makai still run the best dive charter operation this side of Io. But even they can't guarantee sharks, mantas, and dolphins all on a single trip. There's something to be said for being in the right place at the right time.

A big, beautiful whitetip reef shark circled us at Kiawi Point on our first dive. The shark surprised us by coming out of the surf and making a big swing

around us before heading back out over the reef. It was the first shark sighting for many in the group, and you could hear the oohs and aahs through regs. Note: If you don't get up into the surf in that area, you're missing out on the fun. One time, I got to see a couple of dozen reef fish literally poured over the lip of the reef by a particularly strong backrush.

We did the manta night dive. I wouldn't do this dive again. There were at least 40-50 divers in the water, watching two (okay, they were exquisite) mantas frolicking in the plankton buffet created by the *Kona Surf's* lights. Too many divers were petting the mantas as they went by, videographers blocking off the mantas' paths and so on. It

was a circus, and I was embarrassed to be part of it. If I had only known. . . .

At Turtle Towers, we were bitching about the poor visibility (and watching half a dozen green sea turtles). I was thinking, "You know, poor visibility means food in the water. . . ." Right on cue, an unplanned manta swooped by us at the southern tower. There's nothing like the chill you get up your spine when you hear shrieking through regulators right behind you.

In the bay north of the airport, we were surrounded and buzzed by a huge school of spinner dolphins. Some of our group were doing their safety stop (admittedly, as far out in blue water as they could manage) when the dolphins swam right past. We spent most of our dives in that bay with a sound track of dolphin pings and clicks.

Then it got better. Dive Makai occasionally runs "south" trips, 3-tank trips where they take the *Lio Kai* as far down south as the weather and gas tank will stand. We did one of those, and on the way down, Lisa said that they had occasionally seen a hammerhead in Horseshoe Canyon, and even if we didn't, there would be a ton of fish. So, while the rest of the group were working their way up from the depths, I was parked at 70 feet in the middle of the canyon, looking for those bad boys. Sure enough, here came two big hammerheads over the north ridge of the canyon; the larger one, a female, was easily 10 feet. Sadly, they hung a U-turn at the north rim of the canyon.

On the way back north, we stopped at Red Hill to do some cavern dives (not for claustrophobic divers). In one, dive-master Alexa had to turn us around because the cavern

entrance was being used as a resting place by a large whitetip reef shark. I spent a while looking at the shark, feeling sorry for her because of the big fishhook hanging out of one side of her mouth. I'm told that fishermen are using stainless steel hooks now, so they don't rust and fall out as they used to. I can now admit that I was thinking (2 feet from her nose), "Hey, I have my Deadly

There's nothing like the chill you get up your spine when you hear shrieking through regulators right behind you.

Shears with me. I'll bet I could cut through that hook. . . ."

If you've got a bunch of dives under your weight belt, pay whatever extra freight Lisa charges and do a south trip.

On the last day of the trip, last-minute cancellations knocked us down to just three divers. Tom Shockley badgered divemaster Alexa Beckman (the big animal magnet on the staff) into coming with us, even though that made a 1:1 staff-to-customer ratio (Lisa's daughter Kendra was divemastering as well). With just three experienced divers to worry about, we did a warp-speed drift dive around Keahole Point. It started out slow, but all of a sudden we were zipping over the intake pipes for the Natural Energy Lab at the same velocity I have experienced in Palau. Needless to say, we were surrounded by fish. At one point, my buddy and I grabbed an old buoy rope to

wait for the rest of our formation. While strung out like flags in a stiff breeze, we looked out over the dropoff to see a couple of eagle rays effortlessly hanging in the current.

Back at Kiawi Point, another eagle ray stopped by to say Hi. Finally, having sucked my tank almost dry, I returned to the boat through a huge school of opelu (mackerel scad). I was standing in the boat, dejectedly packing my gear for the last time on the trip, when Kendra screamed, "There's a whale shark right under the boat!" Yeah, sure. I had been asking for a whale shark all week, and they had delivered everything but; they were having some fun at my expense. But in the half nanosecond it took me to think that, Kendra was off the boat with a mask in hand. In another half nanosecond, so was I, but the big guy was nowhere to be found. Just then, Alexa surfaced from her dive and yelled at Kendra did she see the whale shark. In the meantime, I was hanging off the back of the boat, when a real honest-you-wouldn't-believe-this 20-foot whale shark swam up from behind the stern. I yelled, and everybody who wasn't already in the water piled in. He swam right up to us, then slowly turned and swam away, with us following as fast as we could on snorkel. It's probably the closest thing I've ever had to a religious experience.

Big critters aside, Dive Makai still has laser-like accuracy in finding little critters. We got flame angels, bandit angels, saddleback butterflies, reticulated butterflies, leaf fish, etc., etc., throughout the week. Their all-female divemaster team of Amy, Alexa, and Kendra is simply top-notch. I especially enjoyed Kendra's fins: on the bottom, one says "Kendra," the other, "Follow me."

I saw my first fish collectors in action. They were walking over the reef, nets in hand, crushing the coral. "Oh yeah," said Tom, "crushing the coral like that eliminates the habitat for the fish so they have nowhere to hide — makes 'em easier to catch." I also went up and checked out the plastic garbage can full of yellow tangs and Moorish idols they had hanging from a line on their boat. Another thought: "Hey, I have my Deadly Shears with me. I

bet I could cut a big hole in the side of that damn thing. . . ." In the meantime, the heinous collectors were peering at me through masks from their boat. Those shears are going to get me in deep trouble.

Pu'uhonua' O Honaunau (Place of Refuge) was a pretty shore dive, but my buddy and I didn't think it was worth the long trip down (and the unnerving drive back over 1,500 feet high with a week's worth of

nitrogen in us). On the other hand, Mile Marker 4 on Ali'i Drive is a wonderful beach dive. Go out to the reef structure and turn left. Two of our group saw a Spanish dancer nudibranch there during our first-day warmup dive.

Dive Makai, (808) 329-2025 (fax that number too). P.O. Box 2955, Kailua-Kona, HI 96745. Make reservations before you go over — they can (and do) fill up.



Weight and Balance

A Review of the USD Alcyone BC

We've devoted more space to this review than we would normally give a BC, because there aren't many back-mounted BCs around and there are a lot of misconceptions about their relative safety. Back-mounted BCs carry most or all of their buoyancy behind the diver, as opposed to wrap-around BCs whose air bladders usually include torso, underarm, and shoulder compartments.

B.C. BCs

In the beginning, there were no BCs, and then there were lots of horsecollars. And the divers inflated them, and lo, they had pains in their crotches, and it was Not Good. Horse collars begat Scubapro Stabilizer jackets and other wrap-arounds, as well as back-mounted AT-Packs that bore their own weights. Ridicule and fear fell upon the divers who used the AT-Packs, because they would not freely shed their lead upon command. AT-Packs vanished from the market.

The multitudes also shunned back-mounted BCs without weights, because divers feared floating face down, unconscious. For a time, back-mounted BCs, with and without weights, nearly vanished from the face of the Earth, and wrap-arounds had dominance over the waters. But the story wasn't over yet. . . .

Face Down and Counting

Few instructors have actually tested the ability of various BCs to rotate an unconscious diver and keep his face out of the water. With this goal in mind, several years ago I took about a dozen different kinds of popular BCs — wrap-arounds, horsecollars, and back-mounted models — to a large swimming pool. Wearing full tropical gear (tank, 3-mm wetsuit, weights, and fins), I tried one BC after another to see if any of them would consistently (1) turn me face-up on the surface if I exhaled and went limp, and (2)

hold me in that position with my face out of the water.

All the BCs rotated my relaxed body one way or another on the surface when they were partly or completely full of air. I was surprised to find that the stable position seemed to depend mainly on the location of my tank and weights, rather than on the BC design. The higher the tank in the pack, the more likely I would be rolled forward, face down in the water. The farther back the weights were on the belt, the more likely that I would roll onto my back. I could find an optimum setting of weights and tank position for each BC, but this varied with the amount of air in the BC. All the BCs were perfectly capable of dumping me over with my face hanging down in the water.

Your BC Is Not a Hero

At the end of the test series, I felt as if my instructor, and the *New Science of Skin and Scuba*