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*Dancer*, the *Ocean Hunter*, or one from the hotels -- was already at our target site, so we'd politely hang back for a while. However, one afternoon at the Blue Corner, a popular site, a gang of eager Japanese descended upon us, heedless of the crowd already on the reef. Divers and sharks sped off in all directions. Fortunately, I'd been enjoying the sharks' parade for half an hour, tethered to the wall's edge with a reef hook.

What did I like best about Palau? The topside scenery? The breathtaking walls? The sharks? The fabulous variety of hard and soft corals? That I never touched a tank? Yes, yes, and yes. But most of all it was the diversity of diving. In diving around the world, I've never had in one location such a mix of walls, wrecks, sharks, caves, reefs, blue holes, coral gardens, and photo models like nautilus and nudibranchs galore. Would I return to Palau? Where's my ticket? Would I return to the high-tech *Palau Aggressor*? Depends -- there are three boats to choose from. Below is a review by another *In Depth* correspondent who has been on all three.

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All three boats, the *Aggressor*, the *Dancer*, and the *Ocean Hunter*, charge \$1,995 for 7 nights (5½ diving days) but the *Aggressor* knocks off \$200 for two weeks back-to-back (\$3,790). Special trips with celebs like Cousteau, Church, Waterman, etc., are more. The *Dancer*'s 10-day trip is \$2,895 through agents or direct at 1-800-9-DANCER or 305-669-9391, fax 305-669-9475. Book the *Aggressor* through agents or direct at 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628, fax 504-384-0817. To book the *Ocean Hunter*, contact Sea&Sea at 800-348-9778 or 415-434-3400, fax 415-434-3409. . . . Diving is good year-round, although the rainy season is late summer through early fall and Japanese crowds arrive in winter. . . . Water temperatures can be as low as 76° in winter, a balmy 84° in summer; visibility 100+ feet in winter, a mite less in summer. . . . A string of extras — a costly overnight at a Guam motel, dinner off the boat one night, a crew tip, a day room at the Palau Pacific on arrival and departure days, and various taxes (\$85 in two weeks) — tacked almost four hundred bucks onto my *Aggressor* trip's total tab. Fortunately, plastic works on the boat and elsewhere. . . . Continental's Air Micronesia is the only way to go (from the West Coast, a variable \$1,500). . . . An overnight in Guam is unavoidable. If affordable, another overnight in Honolulu helps jet-lag recovery. . . . A nice, small guidebook: *Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Palau*, by Tim Rock and Francis Toribiong (Pisces Books), \$12 in U.S. dive shops, lots more on Palau.

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## **Ditty Bag**

*Palau Aggressor*? Depends -- there are three boats to choose from. Below is a review by another *In Depth* correspondent who has been on all three.

K. R.

## **The Other Palau Live-Aboards**

The three live-aboards operating in Palau offer slightly different angles on diver comfort and activity. Whereas the spoil-you-rotten *Sun Dancer* may not seriously encourage night diving, the *Aggressor*, which does, won't bring a hot mug of coffee to your cabin in the morning. While the *Ocean Hunter* may charm you with its nautical feel and intimate accommodations, the *Sun Dancer* will make you forget you're even on a boat.

### **Peter Hughes's *Sun Dancer***

Six-thirty a.m.: a knock on my cabin door, usually grounds for justifiable homicide, signals the arrival of Captain's Coffee Service. Coffee service? Extra-thick Oscar de la Renta terrycloth robes? A staff in naval uniforms? A5-course, sit-down dinner with tablecloths? Peter Hughes's *Sun Dancer* is clearly going after a different live-aboard experience.

Clean lines, brushed aluminum paneling, color schemes reflecting Palauan sunsets: Peter Hughes has outfitted the fourth and most glorious pearl in his string of luxury yachts

. . . Captain's Coffee Service? Extra-thick Oscar de la Renta terrycloth robes? A staff in naval uniforms? Peter Hughes's *Sun Dancer* is clearly going after a different live-aboard experience.

## Palau's LiveAboards

|                  | <i>Palau Aggressor II</i> | <i>Sun Dancer</i>           | <i>Ocean Hunter</i>                          |
|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Length           | 106 ft                    | 119 ft                      | 60 ft  |
| Beam             | 31 ft                     | 23 ft                       | 16 ft  |
| Draft            | 4.5 ft                    | 7.5 ft                      | 5 ft   |
| Cruise speed     | 21 kt                     | 10 kt                       | 7 kt   |
| Cabins           | 8                         | 8                           | 3  |
| Air conditioning | Everywhere                | Everywhere                  | Everywhere                                   |
| Food             | Very good                 | Excellent                   | Excellent                                    |
| Crew             | 8                         | 8                           | 3  |
| Launch date      | 1995                      | 1994                        | 1993   |
| Photo services   | On board                  | On board                    | On shore                                     |
| Rentals          | On board                  | On board                    | On shore                                     |
| Electricity      | 110V                      | 110V                        | 110V/220V                                    |
| Diver capacity   | 16                        | 16                          | 6  |
| Diving format    | Chase boat                | Chase boat                  | Main ship                                    |
| Avg. dives/week  | 27                        | 22                          | 35+  |
| Extras           | Hot tub spa               | Sit-down dinner<br>Open bar | No chase boat<br>Captain's<br>Coffee Service |
|                  |                           |                             | Unlimited diving                             |

Recently built at a cost of \$200,000, it is used to bring the dive sites nearer to the *Sun Dancer* as she lies in snug harbor. Most nights, I even forgot I was on a boat.

The *Sun Dancer* offers only four dives a day. The sit-down dinner makes it logistically difficult, but I would have liked to see more attention paid to putting us in the water after

as though he were planning to make it his permanent home. Converted from a crew boat, it was especially fitted for Palauan waters with stabilizers, two reverse-osmosis desalinators, twin generators, and a spare skiff.

With four accessible decks *Sun Dancer* feels spacious even with its full complement of 16 divers. In the hull is the photo lab/video editor, light table, lounge, library, bistro, and the Owners' Suite. (Tip: When booking your trip, you may request this room. Though it's larger and has a bathtub, I prefer the huge picture windows of the standard cabins.) The main deck holds the guest quarters (with an assortment of bed configurations), each with private bathrooms.

Centered around a camera table, the dive deck is equipped with two freshwater showers and equipment baths. There's ample storage for dive and photo gear, but watch out for the onboard E-6 processing; I had several rolls ruined in burned-out chemicals. Bring your film home, or use Photo Palau's same-day service at the Palau Pacific Resort (680-488-2600).

The *Sun Dancer* puts you on the reefs using its own 30-foot state-of-the-art chase boat, the *Safe Dancer*, piloted by charming Second Captain John Blair, an Australian who doubles as ship troubadour, entertaining guests on the "moon deck" with his bawdy Aussie folk songs. Mr. Blair and his wife, Dot, are well known for their tenure running Palau's first live-aboard, the *Sun Tamarin*, ten years ago.

The *Safe Dancer* is the fastest, most comfortable skiff I've ever been aboard.

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dark. Three times a week at 5:30, the crew briefs a "twilight dive," but no real night diving is offered. (The up side is that, with the lighter schedule, the captain can put you on each reef at the optimum time and tide.) During dinner, guests are asked to vote on several different diving scenarios for the following day. Since the diving here is so diverse, this is a nice way of pleasing everyone.

Speaking of dinner, chef Sylvia Eiley served us excellent and interesting food: sushi, tender steak marinated in papaya, Belizean chicken, grilled black snapper, crunchy salads, shrimp cocktail, Indonesian pork roast, coconut fish soup, and grilled marlin. After-dive snacks were always comforting: homemade brownies, oatmeal chocolate chip cookies, seafood patés, creamy salads. All beverages, including liquor and beer, are included in the package price, though drinking is not allowed during the dive day.

### **Ocean Hunter**

In 1986, Navot and Tova Bornovski operated Palau's first live-aboard, the *Sun Tamarin*. Tutored in the intricacies of these difficult waters by scuba pioneer Francis Toribiong himself, Navot now offers a serious dive operation for the serious diver. *Ocean Hunter*, a 60-foot sloop with a 16-foot beam, sails six divers and a crew of three to the less-traveled reefs in Palau, offering seven full days of diving with an average dose of five or six dives daily.

Built by Spencer Yachts, the Rolls-Royce of shipbuilders, the steel-hulled *Ocean Hunter* is a charming, family-owned business operated by people whose love of the sea pervades everything they do (their newborn son is even named "Liam" -- Hebrew for "my ocean").

Though the *Ocean Hunter* is a motor sailer, she is pushed along at seven knots by twin 175-horse Detroit Diesels and is almost never under sail. Drawing a slippery five feet of water, she skirts the tricky reefs of Palau, allowing divers the luxury of foregoing a chase boat. In contrast to the *Palau Aggressor* and the *Sun Dancer*, 100 percent of the diving here is done from the mother ship, though a skiff is always ready to go should the unpredictable currents cause you to finish your drift dive in another ocean (if you can't take a joke, don't dive Palau!). Access to the water is via a wide teak dive platform and waist-high tank holders that automatically grab your tank and BC as you simply back into them.

The entire bow is a shaded teak deck that serves as a lounge. If it's a tan you're after, the sun shines bright on the mid-deck between the mast and wheelhouse. Below, private baths, cozy beds, and ample closet space round out the accommodations. The salon is fully equipped with TV, VCR, CD, cassette, and a full selection of diving guides, marine books, and trashy novels. Two 500-gallon-per-day desalinators ensure free-flowing water, both hot and cold.

### **Readers rated:**

| <b><i>Sun Dancer</i></b> |       |
|--------------------------|-------|
| Diving                   | ★★★★★ |
| Accommodations           | ★★★★★ |
| Service                  | ★★★★★ |
| Food                     | ★★★★½ |

| <b><i>Palau Aggressor II</i></b> |       |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| Diving                           | ★★★★★ |
| Accommodations                   | ★★★★★ |
| Service                          | ★★★★★ |
| Food                             | ★★★★  |

| <b><i>Ocean Hunter</i></b> |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Diving                     | ★★★★½ |
| Accommodations             | ★★★★½ |
| Service                    | ★★★★★ |
| Food                       | ★★★★  |

**Readers rated Palau 4.6 stars for large pelagics and, because of strong currents, only 1.5 stars for inexperienced divers.**

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**... . The full moon, clearly visible at 50 feet, cast its light upon thousands of silversides gracing the reef. This is night diving at its finest; it's etched upon my soul.**

**Some of the day boats out of Koror are excellent, but my qualm with this alternative is that they are expensive. Consider a ten-day stay on-island: at \$95 for a two-tank dive, hotel, transportation, long rides to the dive sites, and food (credit for bento-box lunches with Spam!), you are looking at more than \$2,300 for only twenty dives. For \$200-\$500 less, a live-aboard will put you right on top of the sites and allow you to make at least 50 dives.**

**J. Q.**

Many boats advertise "unlimited diving," but the *Ocean Hunter* is truly an unlimited-dive vessel. Before lunch is served, you'll have had the opportunity to descend onto the reefs thrice. After lunch, the first afternoon dive is briefed and executed. An hour and a half later, a delicious, fresh-fruit shake is served along with "boatmade" cake. Then it's time for dive five.

I casually mentioned to Navot that I had never seen a reef at 2:00 a.m., and ten hours later found myself yawning into my regulator -- that is, until I witnessed hundreds of hyper-active pelagics hunting for post-midnight snacks! "There are no limits on the *Ocean Hunter*," says Navot. "It's your boat; you're going to be on it, you make the most of it. With the exception of removing things from the reef, there are no 'nos.'"

At dusk, in the small salon, the evening meal is served, and the food is superb. On the healthy side of gourmet, chef Solomon Viray offers Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Continental, and Island cuisines; falafel, hummus, and cous-cous reflect the owners' Mediterranean heritage. The soursop sorbet is a boat specialty, and heavenly. Beer, liquor, and canned soft drinks are available, at a charge. Fresh fruit juices and delicious fruit shakes are free and served all day.

After dinner, you may dive again and again. It was 11 p.m. when I savored one of the most amazing dives of my career. Fifty slipper lobsters a foot long marched across the floor of the cavern at Blue Holes. Through the natural shaft cut into the reef, the full moon, clearly visible at 50 feet, sailed across the eastern sky and cast its light upon thousands of silversides gracing the reef. This is night diving at its finest; it's etched upon my soul.

The *Ocean Hunter* offers 5- to 14-day charters. They spend more time on the eastern side of Palau than the other boats, and they never dive the same site twice, unless the guests wish to return to a favorite reef.

M. D.

## ***Who You Gonna Call?***

The *Ocean Hunter*, *Aggressor*, and *Sun Dancer* are all world-class operations, their crews conscientious and professional. I'm hard pressed to recommend one over the other. They have different styles in delivering what Palau has to offer, each catering to a different diver. Sure, the 5-foot picture windows on the *Sun Dancer* make for spectacular views, but the *Aggressor*'s hot tub is sublime and the nautical feel of the *Ocean Hunter* is unique in today's dive world. Though the *Aggressor*'s hydraulically launched jet boat is the coolest contraption I've seen, the *Sun Dancer*'s chase boat is much more comfortable and the *Ocean Hunter*'s ability to forego skiffs entirely is ultimately convenient. The *Aggressor* has a relaxed, casual style, and the luxury of Peter Hughes's boat is intoxicating, but the *Ocean Hunter* offers the most dives for the dollar. Your dime, you do the flip.

J. Q.