

## VANUATU

The world's largest air-accessible wreck, the *President Coolidge*, a 640-foot ocean liner converted into a troop ship, is a beach dive on Espiritu Santo. It's mainly for advanced divers, starting at 70 feet and going down to 250. . . . Check with DAN about your evacuation insurance before going; you may not be covered due to the number of divers getting bent on this site. . . . Some diving is available from the capital city of Port-Vila, but it's not spectacular. . . . Little reef diving is offered so far. . . . Water temperatures in February hit the mid 80s and in September may drop as low as 70. . . . Don't miss the side trip to Tanna Island to visit the active volcano, dugongs, and Melanesian villagers living according to ancient customs. . . . Other side trips include the island of Pentecost in April to early June to see the land divers leap head-first from 70-foot towers with nothing but vines tied around their ankles. . . .

(maximum capacity 12). Captain has pioneered this northern area of reef, named half the sites. Saw only one other boat entire trip. Not a plush live-aboard but well laid out. I can't imagine a better dive trip. Captain is very knowledgeable, always picked a good dive site. Trip left and returned to Lockhart River. Included a charter flight from Cairns to connect with the boat. October-November best time of year to go. ((61 +7) 4058 1408 Fax (61 +7) 4058 1404; e-mail [diveinfo@reefcruises.com.au](mailto:diveinfo@reefcruises.com.au); website [www.reefcruises.com.au](http://www.reefcruises.com.au))

***Spirit of Freedom, October 1999, Mike A. Johnson, Decatur, GA.*** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 78 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: depth. Trip was two weeks. Eight days on boat out of Cairns to Coral Sea. Always take backup dive computer plus battery charger for light. Don't rely on airlines (Delta) to be on time. Need to be sure more layover time on way out. We had 3.5 hours still missed flight from LA to Sydney. Trip diving (after flight). Great Food — too much to eat — all great. Great sea life. Vis, weather, all perfect. (+6129-5526300; Fax +6129-5523328)

## LIVE-ABOARDS

## AUSTRALIA

***Auriga Bay II, October 1999, Ed Salkeld, La Mesa, CA.*** Vis: 90-100 ft. Water: 81 degrees. Outstanding trip. Only seven divers and crew

***Spoilsport, August 1999, Don Garrido (dgarrido@blast.net)*** Whitehouse Sta., NJ. Vis: 90-100 ft. Water: 72-75 degrees. (800-952-4319; e-mail [usa@mikeball.com](mailto:usa@mikeball.com); website [www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com))

***Spoilsport, October 1999, Bill Smythe, Scott's Valley, CA.*** Vis: 50 to 100 ft. Water: 78 to 82 degrees,

calm and flat, some currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 100 ft. Quality operation. It helped to have good diving conditions, I am 70 years old and I had 30+ years on most of the divers. They were always there to help me, I needed none, but it was a nice touch. I don't use a computer; no problem. I took extra time at the de-con bar and knowing my limits, only dove twice a day. The *Yongala* was all that they said. We lucked out, calm, little current, good vis.

***Spoilsport/Supersport, February***

**2000, Ray Sullivan.** Better diving on the GBR is the north of Cairns (which reminds me of a cross between Cozumel and Gulf Shores, Alabama. Water 82-84F and visibility 60-80 feet. Cyclone Steve made landfall at Cairns while we were on the GBR, but did not affect us. Fish life is diverse and abundant. Corals are healthy with little bleaching and spotty Crown-of-Thorn infestations. Not a lot of soft coral, but hard corals are beautiful, especially table corals. Sharks most every dive — usually white-tips, black-tips, gray reef sharks. Potato cod are larger than any grouper in Cozumel at the famous Cod Hole where 10 to 15 are fed. Diving begins at Townsville. Flinders Reef; sharks are common, but reef fish are not as plentiful. Visibility is better than on the GBR at 100 ft. plus. One highlight is the shark feed at Scuba Zoo; Silver-tipped sharks are all over you. *Spoilsport* makes a stop at the *Yongala*, weather permitting. Visibility was less than 20 ft. *Supersport* is an

80+ft. catamaran, wide, that promotes stability in choppy seas. The boat needed a paint job, but was very diver friendly. Three decks of rooms — 25 passengers and a crew of 12. Food was good, crew was helpful. Premium room was adequate, but small — 8x12 — with adjoining bath. Not much storage space and no hang-up or closet. Marine head/shower combination. Plenty of hot water. Dive deck on rear uncrowded. Four rows of seats with tanks. Dive gear stays assembled for whole trip. Refills to 3200. Dive entry is giant stride about 5ft above water and reentry is easy at ladders on either pontoon. Drift dive pickup is by inflatables. Fresh water hot shower and towel available after dive.

*Spoilsport* is a 100+ foot catamaran — 35ft wide, 20 passengers, crew of 10. Nicer and bigger boat than *Supersport*. Also in need of a paint job. Spacious lounge. No toilet anywhere except your cabin — none on dive deck. Only outside shower is down on entry platforms making it unhandy to shower off after removing gear. Food is only average. Juice and snacks are lacking. Crew doesn't seem to be well organized and doesn't get up until 7am. Crew of 10 is stretched a thin to handle everyone's needs. E-6 processing is difficult to get done.

***Spoilsport, March 2000, Robert and Janet Czapski, Northville, MI.***

Vis: 50 to 100 ft.+. Water: 82 to 84 degrees. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130'. *Spoilsport* can use an upgrade in the cabin areas, but storage was plentiful. Food was varied, plentiful and very tasty. They

accommodated vegetarians very well and the afternoon snacks were warm and good. The whole crew couldn't do enough for you whether the kitchen staff, the captain or the very talented trip director and dive staff. Nitrox and air fills were always 3000+psi. Diving overall was very good. However, cyclone Tessi shortened trip so we missed Scuba Zoo and the *Yongala* wreck so we were somewhat disappointed; no fault of the Mike Ball crew who made land emergency accommodations for us.

***Spoilsport, April 2000, Harry L. Cure, Jr. (cure@onramp.net, Fort Worth, TX. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet.***

Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. Dive restrictions: 130 foot limit was only restriction. Mike Ball's is a very well run live-aboard with a good crew and cook. The dive platform area is very good. My biggest complaint is the sharing of bathrooms on the boat. Separate baths in each suite would be a big improvement

***Spoilsport, April 2000, Susan Carter, Oakland, CA. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet.***

Water: 79 to 82 F., calm choppy currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: Depth limits: 130 with air, 110 with EAN 32, one planned air dive to 150. Dive within your computer limits, air and time logged by crew after each dive (didn't check computers). No time restrictions. The good: diversity and health of the corals, this was an exploratory trip in the Coral Sea. I was so impressed with the diversity of south pacific corals and sea life, especially

fish. Sharks on every dive, but no rays, and only a few turtles. Beautiful lionfish. The crew and the boat were very comfortable. There is now a sunshade on the top deck: an excellent addition. Food was great and plentiful. Good Australian wine was free with dinner and they left the bottles on the table after dinner: most of us spent almost nothing at the bar. The first dive was done before breakfast (though coffee, fruit and cereal were available). Most diving from the boat, although when the currents were running they would take you up a wall in the inflatable and let you drift back to the boat, which was nice. On BBQ night we visited Flinders Cay, basically a small piece of sand, and were treated to the sight of one-minute old baby just hatched turtles making their run down the sand to the sea. When space is available you can upgrade your cabin at a very reduced rate. Be one of the first to check in with the cruise director on board to take advantage of this. We went from the cheapest category to a standard cabin, with nice picture window, for much less than it would have cost to book in the higher category. The bad: weather turned nasty on the last day of our trip, and on the last night the boat broke anchor and ran up on the reef, causing major damage to the reef and minor damage to the boat. The crew handled the situation very well. However, there were two night divers in the water, and with no underwater recall system and their lights not visible from the boat we spent almost 20 minutes anxiously trying to locate them before

the Cpt. could get the boat off the reef (he didn't want to move the boat with divers in the water). Result: further damage to the reef, very anxious friends and crew on board, and when they were located by their lights, the crew that went to alert them to the problem (they had no idea what had happened) directed them to surface rather quickly, leading to anxious divers as well (they ended on O2 for a few hours, but weren't bent). Mike, get an Underwater Recall System. They didn't even have an informal recall procedure (i.e. revving of engines). Because of the nasty weather we came into port a half day early, but no one complained. For better weather, go a little later in the fall (June) or late spring (November). What I wished I had known before I left: how favorable the exchange rate was for US folks. I would have insisted on dealing directly with Mike Ball in Townsville, not the US office, and would have asked to pay in US dollars. Townsville is dullsville, especially in their summer and fall when it is hot, but you can't swim in the ocean due to box jellies. The rest of Queensland and Australia is WONDERFUL: try to spend time topside and on the boat. Overall, a top rated live-aboard experience and a wonderful trip!

***Spoilsport, Lisa Carangelo, Swampscott, MA.*** Vis: 80-120 ft. Water: 68-70 degrees. Deepest dive first, have a buddy on each dive. Trip departs from Townsville — a slightly sleepy place but very safe and easy to make your way around. Staff was superb! Safe diving was stressed while

maintaining that delicate balance for experienced divers, too. Staff will accompany anyone on any dive. They track max depth/time and amount of safety stop(s) otherwise the dive platform was open most of the day. "*Spoilsport*" was in fabulous condition, just back from dry dock last month. Plenty of hot water, rinse tanks and tables for cameras on dive deck. Food was incredible! Lots of options at every meal. Chef Marty Comtes, will gracefully accommodate any food allergies. Fabulous desserts: Bonofie pie, eclairs, lovely cakes etc. Dive sites: *Yongala Wreck*; Flinders Reef, Eel Garden, Berlin Wall, Softwood Forest, Midnight, Watanabe Pinnacle, Tuna Salad, Anemone City. Due to 3 levels of accommodations/costs of trip people of opposite genders were assigned to cabins (2 twin beds). In one case, the match was very uncomfortable and the woman moved to sleep above deck on a beach chair. When Capt. Mike Maxwell became aware, he rearranged some crew members so both guests had pleasant, comfortable sleeping places below decks.

***Supersport, March 2000, George and Eva Moody, Tulsa, OK.*** Vis: 60 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 85 degrees, calm and flat. Dive restrictions: depth limits deep dives first, no booze 8 hours before dive; checkout and sign in after dive; briefings-lots of them. Not as plush as *Paradise Sport*, but a nice vessel. Good crew. Glad *Supersport* is such a steady ship, had a very rough 12 hr. trip back to Cairns. Missed several cyclones that blew through Cairns just before our trip.

Sunshine makes such a difference; possible the reefs in PNG are healthier and more diverse, but the Great Barrier Reef in the sunshine is hard to beat. This 4 day/3night trip was over too soon. (800-952-4319; e-mail [usa@mikeball.com](mailto:usa@mikeball.com); website [www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com))

***Supersport, January 2000, Scott Page-Pagter*** ([scottp\\_p@hotmail.com](mailto:scottp_p@hotmail.com)), **Valencia, CA.** Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 85 degrees. Dive restrictions: Safety Stops. Amazing trip, great staff. Cod Hole is amazing, though we left feeding early to go see Shark Alley. Saw 6-8 sharks! My favorite site was Steve's Bommie, sea life galore! Everything from turtles and schools of trevally to crystal shrimp, flame filefish and mantis shrimp.

***Taka II, Taka Dive, September 1999, Charles F. Spirka, Seattle, WA.*** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 75 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 110 ft. and 50 min. Also did a day boat Tusa dive #5 grade dive operation. We did not know that there was a maximum time limit of 50 minutes. They filled tanks to 2700-2800 psi to limit the time. Many inexperienced divers onboard caused delays and probably contributed to the bottom time limit and depth limit. Too many people on boats 25+ divers. Other boats held 40-80 people /divers! ((07) 4051-8722; Fax (07) 4031-2739; e-mail [takadive@taka.com.au](mailto:takadive@taka.com.au); website [www.taka.com.au/osprey.html](http://www.taka.com.au/osprey.html))

***Taka II, May/June 2000, Terri L. Campbell, Phoenix, AZ.*** Booked 4 days 3 nights on the *TAKA II* live

aboard, it should have been named the *KAKA II*. The crew was rude, inconsiderate, drinking, unresponsive to our concerns, they allowed a novice diver from Egypt into the rough seas without the regulator in her mouth, the main focus was on meeting the state requirements of every diver signing on and off the boat with their name and air amount. The linens were stained and soiled with human body fluids, the cabins reeked of stale urine. Additionally there was mold throughout entire boat. The food was less than appealing adding to its lack of palate there was a slop bucket located in the middle of the galley (where we picked up our tasteless entrée) it was our responsibility as paying guests to deposit our food in the bucket and clean our dishes off before putting them in for washing. The only heads were on the stern of the ship, they also served as the showers for all 16 people on board. The crew had no problem advising that if we forgot to lock the door when showering, that mistake would be included in the trip video. The showers did not have sufficient hot water for all the guests and crew to shower, and the crew always managed to monopolize the showers and the hot water first. I am truly not certain whether there was a captain or engineer on the ship since we did not see either, and were warned that they were not too friendly. That 2 people in our party were allergic to mold, others linens could not be replaced for clean unsoiled ones, and the inability to rid the cabins of urine forced to hire a sea plane to rescue us from this hovel, 14 hours out to sea. Subsequently the

response from the *TAKA II* is, you did not pay a lot so this is what you have to expect. TAKA was not willing to acknowledge any of our complaints or concerns their basic response was you get what you pay for.

**True North, North Star Charters, October 1999, Kim Kalisch, Fremont, CA.** Vis: 50-150 ft. Water: 75-79 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced; time limit (40-50 min) Go less deep each dive. This was the second trip to the Rowley's for the new boat. Is this the best live-aboard in the world currently? You bet! We were in a luxury stateroom and it was wonderful. The food is good Aussie fare and you don't go away hungry. The membrane Nitrox system was not operational. All the Nitrox tanks had DIN fittings, so be prepared. The diving was very good. The water viz (50-150 ft.) depended on the tide. They tried to dive as much as possible on the incoming tides to get clear water. Best sights: "South Park," beautiful wall, lots of fish, long drift. "Boat Channel." How fast can you fly without eating coral? "The Aquarium" ride the incoming tide over the outer reef in four feet of water. The colors are spectacular. The crew and passengers made the trip with their Aussie hospitality. (+61 618-9192-1829; Fax +61 618-9192-1830; e-mail [cruise@NorthStarCharters.com.au](mailto:cruise@NorthStarCharters.com.au))

## Fiji

**Fiji Aggressor, November 1999, Tyler Yarbrough (tjyarbro@aol.com), San Leandro, CA.** Vis: 20-75 ft. Water: 79-82 degrees. Water: calm, no

currents. Restrictions: Keep dives above your own stated limits (mine was 110 with EAN32), keep it to an hour. Took a beginning photo course with on board Nikonos V equipment. Photo pro Pele Harris was great! \$350 for camera, film, E6 processing, Padi's "merit badge," instruction. Can't beat it! Rainy a good part of the time, making for less than ideal visibility and lighting for photography. *Aggressor* crew was terrific. Level of service only slightly embarrassing. Elvis and Jack in the kitchen turned out enormous amounts of delicious food, Fijian, Thai, American, original. Divemasters Seru, Shawn and Pele found every critter you could ask for, and their enthusiasm was contagious. Boat was almost perfect. It seemed huge to me. 10 divers, and you could easily feel as if it were your own private yacht. Skiff diving makes whatever profile you dive easy. There was no current most of the time, which was a shame. Fiji's reefs, especially away from land, are the healthiest I've ever seen. No coral bleaching, hard and Soft corals were everywhere. Great passages for passing big grey reef sharks and lots of mantas. Manta cleaning station had one big guy going round and round, not 6' from the flashing cameras! Hundreds of barracuda circling! (**Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail: [info@aggressor.com](mailto:info@aggressor.com); website [www.aggressor.com](http://www.aggressor.com)**)

**Fiji Aggressor, December 1999, Dick and Donna Stofer (dstofer@sky.net), Overland Park, KS.** Vis: 40-100 ft.