

Many wolf eels who seem to enjoy exploring divers' gear; octopus grow to huge size. Bill and Annie are enthusiastic hosts who love to share their passion for this area. Simple motel style rooms with private baths, very clean, max. 14 guests. Profane heat, generator power from pre-breakfast to 10 pm. VCR and charger power available all night from battery bank. Food hearty, ample, tasty, varied, served at one big table for staff and guests and snacks on boat. Two boat dives daily (scheduled around the tides) and interesting critter diving at night off the dock. Aluminum 80s and weights/belts provided. Bring a hair dryer for avoiding cold wet heads after night dives and for making neoprene repairs. Hurst Island is 1.5 hours from Port Hardy, once you're there you are isolated on the island. Bring warm clothes and rain gear but hope for sun. Food is plentiful and delicious. Free kayaks. Night diving is great for small critters. Overall diving rivals all but the best sites in PNG, Palau, if you like cold water. (250-949-1755, 888-534-8322; e-mail [scuba@istar.ca](mailto:scuba@istar.ca))

## COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for voyages to uninhabited Cocos Island, three hundred miles offshore. If you're out for challenging, high-tension, big-animal dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures of the Pacific deep, Cocos is one of the more reliable places on earth to find them, but

it's not for the faint-of-heart, coral lovers, or those out-of-tune with their skills. . . . Follow the weather pattern when planning trips as the number of sharks is negatively impacted during El Niño years. . . . Water temperatures run 75 to 85 degrees year-round, and air temperatures are about the same. Visibility and water conditions, however, are unpredictable, with both visibility and wind down in the rainy season (roughly May through November). . . . Northwestern Costa Rica's land-based diving is a smaller-scale version of Cocos Island. There are plenty of sharks (although no massing hammerheads) and a big-ocean feeling with rigorous conditions and an awesome amount of fish life (including good odds of seeing a whale shark). . . . Bat Island offshore is the place to go, so insist on it before booking. . . . Beaches vary from not-so-great to decent, though nature side trips are definitely a double "yes". . . . Shopping is mainly in San Jose, which is also a pleasant city for overnighting. Though Spanish is the national language, English-only speakers can get by. . . .

**Aguila de Osa Inn, March 2000, Steve Polito, Anchorage, AK.** Dive boat out of Drakes Bay took us to Cano Island. 40 min ride from the mainland. They use 3 different boats, they are 31 ft. diesels and the operators are as good as you will find. Water 84 degrees, with thermoclines around 50 ft. that lowered the temp to

## Eastern Pacific

63 degrees. This is where most larger fish were found. A group of mantas 6-8 ft. semi strong currents but not as extreme as diving Palau. Saw a few Groupers in the 75 lb. range, and large groups of barracuda. Dolphins are a regular sight, but go to the bottom which ranges 70-90 ft. Coral is healthy but not as abundant as the Cayman's. Lots of tropical fish. The resort is modestly priced with well-prepared meals in local and American dishes. Using travel agents from Costa Rica will help cut down the cost on airfares and all tours. Dive boats had ladders for easy entry, and radios. Intermediate divers and beginners would enjoy themselves here. Most dive operators only go out every other day with hiking tours to the Cano Island on the off day. The 2 resorts in Drake Bay alternate, so you can easily catch a ride with other Resort that shares the same dock. Lots of iguanas, toucan's, parrots, monkeys, howler and white Face. Trip from the river where the resort picks you up to the resort itself is an adventure, Resorts carved in the Rain Forest. (506 296-2190; Fax 506 232-772)

**Aguila de Osa Inn, May 2000, Bob Woods (bobwoods@pacbell.net) Hillsborough, CA.** Vis: 20 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 85 Fahrenheit, choppy. Gorgeous setting, beautifully executed inn on a hillside overlooking Drake's Bay on the Osa Peninsula. Boat left at 7:30 a.m., travel about 30-45 min. to dive site, do one dive, then go to Island for lunch. After lunch, rest on the island for an hour or so, then go out for a second dive, and

return to the inn at 2:30 or 3:00. Diving was good, with rock formations carpeted with white gorgonians. A fierce thermocline near the bottom dropped the temperature ten degrees over a couple of feet. There was a great variety of underwater life — schooling sharks (white tips), eagle rays, Moorish Idols, octopus in the open during the day, morays, more varieties of puffers than I've seen anywhere before. Lots of King Angelfish and Black Giant Damselfish, unique to this area and the Galapagos. Pluses: Dive staff, boat crews, staff in general were friendly, helpful. Beautiful bungalows, well maintained. Quality of food was excellent (but quantity a bit thin for hungry divers). Minuses: No snacks after second dive. Bar drinks at the inn were expensive — we never really found out what they were but our bar tab indicated that they were about \$7 to \$10 (US) each, depending on what they were. Bottled water was not furnished free of charge but was sold at \$2 per bottle. Water in the rooms (especially hot water) was iffy.

**Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, Condovac Lacosta, August 1999, Nancy Mills, Social Circle, GA.** Vis: 20-40 ft. Water: 76-80 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: Immediate descent as group. Schools of mantas and whale sharks are no more. New owner of Bill Beard's Diving Safari's said no whale sharks sighted since 1997. Did Cat Island — one manta. Did Big Scare — one bull shark. Most dives were low visibility and little coral. Mostly large schools of fish and

rock formations. Lots of eels (photographed nine species) and lots of octopi. Most dives were deep and monotonous. Bill Beard's expensive and inattentive though nice. Snorkeling off beach at condo very interesting. (877-853-0538; Fax 954-351-9740; e-mail [costarica@diveres.com](mailto:costarica@diveres.com); website [www.billbeardcostarica.com](http://www.billbeardcostarica.com))

**Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, El Nakuti, June 2000, Ryan Green, Gainesville, FL.** Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 80-82 degrees. El Nakuti is a new all-inclusive resort service by Bill Beard's Diving Safaris and Adventure Tours. Beautiful, delicious food, unlimited beverages including alcohol even the mini-bar is included, right on the beach.

**Bill Beard's Dive Safaris de Costa Rica, Sol Playa Hermosa, March 2000. Jeff Weiss ([jeff.weiss@anguil.com](mailto:jeff.weiss@anguil.com)) Milwaukee, WI.** Vis: 0 to 30 ft. Water: 60 to 76 degrees, calm and flat, no currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 80 ft. Resort was top notch, same with dive operation, but diving was poor. Mostly brown, no coral, lousy vis.

**El Ocotal, Los Almendros at Playa Ocotal, November 1999, Pat Wikstrom ([mrpat@webworkz.com](mailto:mrpat@webworkz.com)), Warne, NC.** Vis: 15 to 35 Feet. Water: 73 to 81 Fahrenheit, choppy surge currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: Buddy diving, Back on the boat with 500 psi. The \$188 round trip charter price from Atlanta to Costa Rica was too cheap to pass up. Landed at Liberia International in the Guanacaste Province.

Rented a four-wheel drive vehicle from Alamo (\$400 per/wk) and headed out into the jungle. Spent the first three days messing around Arenal Volcano, Tabacon Hot Springs, and the Los Angeles Cloud Forest. Stayed at the Hotel Linda Vista del Norte (\$35 per person/nt includes breakfast) the view from the lodge is downright spectacular. Look to the left and you're faced with a dramatic long range view of Lake Arenal, dead ahead is the still smoking Arenal Volcano itself, and off to the right is a mysterious dreamy landscape of rolling hills filled with Toucans flying from tree to tree and Howler monkeys shouting at each other off in the jungle. Drove to the Pacific coast and stayed in an undersold timeshare community called Los Almendros at Playa Ocotal. The whole three bedroom house right next to the swimming pool rents for \$85 per/nt and could easily handle three couples or a pile of friendly divers. Kitchen, Laundry, A/C in bedrooms, nice pool, muddy beach. Great accommodations at an incredibly cheap price. Drove ten minutes each morning to El Ocotal Resort and dove with their folks. No dock at the resort so divers are ferried out to the dive boats on an antique pontoon boat. Dove the Bay of Papagayo for a couple of days. Dive sites were mostly mini-seamounts or rocky reefs. Water temp 81 degrees above the thermocline and 77 degrees below. Vis was between 20 and 30 ft. (it was right after three solid weeks of rain). Very little coral, but a lot of fish life when you could see it. King and Cortez Angelfish, Imperial Sea

## Eastern Pacific

Urchins, giant Stingrays, large schools of mixed Grunts, and a lot of fish that looked just like the Caribbean varieties but had different colorations. Paid \$70 for a two tank trip to Catalina Island. Water temp 78 to 73 degrees. Vis ranged from 30 ft. to 15 ft. with a noticeably green tinge. Lots of stuff to see, if you were first in line. Lost count of how many Octopus we saw, whole families of Whitetip Sharks, giant schools of silvery Jacks. Saw dolphins and jumping; Devil Fish; (immature Mobulas) during our surface interval. Second dive — about the same — but we were fighting a current on the way back, I lost my buddy, looked around for a minute or two, surfaced into three to four foot seas a long way off from the boat; and I was drifting away. My Dive Alert and the old scuba tuba saved me. Very exciting trip back through 4 to 5 ft. seas. Waves washing over the bow, walls of spray soaking the passengers, divers blowing chunks over the side, folks shivering on the floorboards. I loved it! Since the diving wasn't quite what we wanted we switched gears and went back to the jungle. Although the roads are terrible and it takes awhile to get anywhere, there really are a lot of great day trip adventures available in this area. The jungle canopy high wire tours are a must. The funky little town of Playa del Ocotol had some souvenir shops, several bars, and a couple of good restaurants. Great trip. (506-670-0321; Fax: (506) 670-0083)

**El Ocotol, February 2000, Robert Emann (reemann@yahoo.com), Sunrise FL.** Vis: 10 to 15 feet. Water:

66 to 70 F, choppy currents. Dive your own profile. Generally 60-70 feet. Problem was the poor viz averaging 10-15 feet. Divemasters blamed it on el Niño/la Niña. There may have been many large creatures but they would have had to bump into me to see them. Trip to Bat Island was two hours each way and a surcharge. It started out ok but wind picked up and conditions worsened. Expectations high but poor viz ruined the dive.

**El Ocotol, March 2000, Glenn Kessler (ggekessler@aol.com), Swampscott, MA.** Vis: 10 to 20 Feet. Water: 68 to 77 F, choppy surge currents. El Ocotol is a very pretty place. Very "hilly," so get in shape for the climbing you have to do. The hotel rooms are adequate, but if you can upgrade to the casitas on the hill spend the extra money for a great view. The dive operation was in need of TLC, and I am being gracious. If you need an extra wetsuit for warmth, bring one, because theirs are in terrible shape. The launch to get to the dive boats was in such disrepair that they were continually bailing water as it was leaking so badly. We sat on 2x4's for seating. We were there for a week, and normally 8-10 people were on board. The viz was so bad (10-20 feet) that we lost sight of the 1 divemaster that went down with us every time. We never surfaced with him, and it was obvious that they frankly didn't care. La Niña caused the water conditions, but Costa Rica is a long way to go for such a mediocre dive trip.

**El Ocotol, June 2000, Leanne Wells, (mwells42@wf.net), Mineral Wells,**

**TX.** Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 Fahrenheit, choppy surge currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: Notify DM at 1000 psi, surface interval at 700 requested. Dive plan/profile was adequate. All dove computers. This was my second trip to El Ocotal, so knew what to expect, and my hopes were far exceeded. Mantas on every dive to Catalina. Some just passing, but some stayed around to be admired. One dive group found 20 foot manta trailing big fishing net hooked on “horns” and hooks in flesh. Allowed divers to free him and then followed them for a while. Biggest thrill was school of 500 golden eagle rays seen every day at Catalina. Once was able to swim with the school, literally awash in rays. Beautiful. Have proof on still and video! Visibility was poor; bull sharks were at Bat Island, but you had to look quickly to see them. Big schools of jacks, spadefish. Long boat ride to dive sites, but worth the trouble. Had engine trouble, but management worked hard to be sure that dives were not interrupted. Lots of marine life to see during ride to dive sites: mobula rays turning somersaults in the air, dozens of turtles, small schools of dolphin. Dove three times a day, with management bringing new boat to us at Bat Island. Dive master Jose worked hard to assure a good trip: located lovely small things like Harlequin Shrimp, sea horses, sea slugs, and the beautiful Sea of Cortez juvenile angel fish. Big plus are the nondiving attractions: Tabicon Resort is a must, as is the white water rafting on the Pacuare River.

**El Ocotal, 07/00, John Sommerer, (john.sommerer@jhuapl.edu), Silver Spring, MD.** Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 70 to 83 F, calm surge currents. Low vis meant following the divemaster. Sometimes those of us with reasonable experience could do our own thing, if we had dived the site previously. Drive from San Jose! Internal light-plane TACA flight to Liberia a pain in the \*ss; resulted in clothes, dive equipment going to Nicaragua — didn’t get for three days. El Ocotal beautiful, luxurious. Food well prepared, but limited menu, served on spectacular terrace. Get a bungalow; the topside rooms are a long hike up from the beach! # 207 uniquely has a fantastic view. Challenging diving, low vis, strong current, great critters. Little coral. Great divemasters who know the sites. One dive, a specific rock was moved to reveal pair of harlequin shrimp (rock replaced after photos). Seahorses and juvenile whitetips in known locations. Boats are somewhat primitive. No table, rinse tank on boats. Good, careful help by crew. Rinse tank at beach on request. No processing or photoshop. No rental equipment. Ride to Bat Is. long, perhaps not worth it with low vis. Ride to Cat Is. shorter. Dove “the wall” at Cat Is. five times. Four dives saw large schools of golden cowrays 2x each. Once was surrounded by 1000s for 8 minutes. Routine sightings of mobula rays, whitetips, giant diamond stingrays. Local dive sites very rewarding, frequently just us and divemaster. Lots of eels (many kinds) and octopi. Frequent eagle rays, turtles, large

## Eastern Pacific

schools of grunts, jacks, and barracuda. A great change from the Caribbean, but not for beginners. Golfo de Papagayo not close to most topside destinations in Costa Rica; allow extra time for Monte Verde, Arenal, etc.

### **Jinetes De Osa, January 2000, Stewart Kaslow, Maplewood, NJ.**

Vis: 10 to 50 ft. Water: 76 to 80 degrees, strong currents. Dive your own profile: no. Dive restrictions: time due to schedule. Divemaster Jack tried to find better vis, treated experienced divers appropriately and washed everyone's gear each night. Also provided a camera bucket when asked. Rooms were cleaned each day. Fresh baked bread and desserts each day. Good solid boat. Nice beach to have lunch between dives. Saw dolphin to and from Cano Island. Christa very pleasant and tried to accommodate. Bad: Vis. was very poor, 10-20 ft. on most dives, maximum 50 ft. for part of one dive. Paid for 9 dives, did 7 dives; combination of poor vis. strong currents and thermoclines, just too discouraging to bother. Only photos possible were close-up with rock background. Getting to Drakes Bay, Costa Rica is an adventure. Small plane from San Jose will only take 25 lbs. baggage. Photographers take note. Bus is a local, takes 6 hrs. if lucky to Palmar Norte. Then cab to Siepe. Overnight then two hour boat trip to Drakes Bay. No hot water showers. No electric except 5:30 pm to 10:30 pm. Not a dive location. Dive or snorkel as a diversion. Beautiful spot at the edge of the Corcavado National Park. Great for hiking in pristine rain

forest, lots of animal life, monkeys (however white face) birds, sloths and others. River tubing, kayaking is available as well as horseback riding. **(800-317-0333; 1- 303-838-0969; e-mail crventur@costaricadiving.com; www.costaricadiving.com)**

**Jinetes De Osa, January 2000, Greg Frisenda, Deerfield, IL.** Vis: 10 to 20 ft., 60 best on site. Water: 75 to 78 degrees, strong currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: none. Well the trip from San Jose was great, 45 min. plane; 45 min. cab; 1-1/2hr. fabulous boat ride. The resort was rustic, even primitive. Everything was hardwood. The rooms were all like in 1 structure (ours had no windows). We made them change our room. Only a few had private toilets and showers (always cold). The tops of all the rooms were open (for ventilation) and the screens covered only the openings except about 2" at top so the bugs, which were scarce, could still get in. Got lots of mosquito bites. Also with the tops open you hear everything going on in any of the other rooms, even talking...very annoying. There was 1 hammock and the rest of the seating was hardwood straight back chairs or benches (very uncomfortable), electricity was only on from 5:30 pm to 10:30 pm so most had to read by flashlight in very uncomfortable chairs. Rooms didn't even have nails (2 tiny 1 ft. shelves) 1 desk and chair, had to live out of suitcases, literally; no place to even hang things on. Service was excellent, tho. The food was good but not plentiful. The diving sucked. Not a dive vacation. Mantas

advertised, 5\* diving, sharks, etc. We dove 10x 5x at same time. Vis. was 10-20 ft. Sometimes 50 ft.; sharks were reef white tips, mantas small mobulas, no whales. Lots of schools of jacks, etc. but nothing really exciting. Lots of current and thermo dives (not very comfortable). My friend and I put our camera great away after first day diving. We also dumped 2 dives (took the loss) and did land-based things. Land things were great—horseback riding, tubing in rapids, hiking in Cocavado were super. But not a dive destination. Very disappointed but made the best out of it by doing land things and had fun. Worst part was Tropical Adventures recommended this place wholeheartedly. Was not cheap either as much as a live-aboard. Recommend the area for land based things, but not Jinetes. There were other more comfy resorts there at same price.

## MEXICO

Before Cocos Island, Costa Rica, the seamounts of the Sea of Cortez were the place for schooling hammerheads and sea lions. The sea lions are still there, although the hammerheads are harder to predict. . . . Some live-aboards now run to Isla Socorro to find hammerheads, although it's a long ride and there's no guarantee of sharks or good weather. . . . Manta rays are a little more reliable, and they have a reputation for letting divers approach them. . . . Water visibility and temperatures vary dramatically. In

winter and spring there's a thermocline, with 70 to 80 degree water on the surface and 50 to 60 degree water below 30-40 feet. . . . Visibility is determined by the plankton blooms; while it's low (25–40 feet) in midsummer, it generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer. . . . From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult. . . . Wear a wetsuit for protection from jellyfish even if the water's warm. . . . Whale-watching season is from December through March. . . . The nice hotels and restaurants in Cabo have helped make it a long-weekend retreat for some California divers. . . .

## Cabo Pulmo

**Cabo Pulmo Divers, November 1999, Bill Mashek, rubicon@metro.net, Rubicon Adventures, Forestville, CA.** My 5th trip since '75.0 Cabo Pulmo is only coral reef in the Western Pacific. Though the reefs are not spectacular, they are very interesting and sea life is prolific. Visibility approx. 60+ in late summer. I have heard 100+ water temp. 84 with no thermocline to 60 ft. Several large rays and the biggest green moray. Easy 5-10 minute boat ride to dive sites (via ponga) and snorkeling is excellent (about 50 yards from shore). Great place for a family with small kids or a couple on a honeymoon. Not a lot to do other than read, dive, fish and enjoy your environment. Cabo Pulmo Divers the only operation taking folks out. Though there are two others in the