

Eastern Pacific

feel again like they were imposing repeatedly. Otherwise, food was good and plentiful for the guests. Then at the end of the trip, we were appalled to find out that the crew did not have dinner in the guests had seconds. If you do decide to take this trip, buy your airline tickets from Sansa Airlines web site www.flysansa.com and save yourself the Buchbinder's "service fee." Tina (another dive-master) and Mario (crew) made the trip as enjoyable as possible. Unfortunately, this was Tina's last trip for obvious reasons. 5 of the 6 guests (from around the world with extensive dive experience, including a dive master of 25 years) on this dive trip thought this operation was a so unprofessional that we needed to warn future guests. Only one rinse tank for gear and camera equipment that caused non-photographers to resort to rinsing their gear in the only tank. (506-775-1076, 505-890-7007; Fax 506-775-1078; email SHARKS@RACSA.CO.CR; website www.theinzantiger.com)

COSTA RICA

***Okeanos Aggressor*, December 1999, Richard Lehach, Larchmont, NY.**

Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 74 to 75 degrees, strong currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: depth in general, 500 psi, 60 minutes. The *Okeanos Aggressor* is due for a major overhaul or scrapping as a dive boat. Rooms are small and unevenly a/c. Food was ok at best. Same salad 6 or 8 days. Many divers reported mild stomach problems from food, not boat

sickness. Diving from Zodiacs without ladders and proper tank storage resulted in damaged equipment and lost pieces of equipment. Crew was pleasant and worked well together but could not overcome boat's shortcomings. La Niña caused poor visibility and cold water. Fish life was present but visibility limited viewing. Long boat rides; 36 hrs. to/from Cocos + air and wait in town wasted 5 of 11 day trip; a very high price. If conditions were good it might be worth the time. Saw and boarded *Undersea Hunter*, much better equipped boat than the *Okeanos*. A seaplane to move divers and a provisioning boat split between the *Hunter* and *Aggressor* boats could make this a much more desirable dive destination and save wear and tear on dive boats on 36 hr. crossings. (Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail: info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

***Okeanos Aggressor*, January 2000, Richard R. Gala, Royal Oak, MI.**

When we arrived the air-conditioning was not on because we were told it would suck up mud because of the low water at the dock. Getting settled in was a very sweaty and smelly experience for all. It took most of the night before the boat and cabins cooled down. Cabin #5 was quite comfortable but the air conditioning never quite made it to those cabins on the top deck and some people took to sleeping on deck. Those rooms that had a double bottom bunk were so narrow and close to the top bunk that any cohabitation was out of the question. Plenty of floor space

to store your stuff but no hooks to hang a shirt or bathing suit in the room. In the private bathroom there was a hook and a single towel rack on the door. When one closed the door, they both jabbed you in the back; one had to stand sideways to use the sink if the door were closed! It took at least 3-5 tries to clear the bowl and that was a complaint throughout the boat. The light over the bunks was so weak that reading in your bunk was impossible. The boat gave one the feeling that it could use new carpeting and a paint job to make it more alive. Food was adequate but one got tired of it. Wine was served with every evening meal and all booze, beer and wine were free. But if you had a beer or wine at lunch you were through diving for the day. We all decided to party at night and within the Russian group (which made up half the divers) two entertainers made the evenings most enjoyable. The dive briefings were good and the crew went out of their way to help us with our every need. The crossing to Cocos Island was longer than the 36 hours we expected and we did not arrive until early afternoon of the 2nd day that meant that we could only make one daylight dive. We also left early the last day so missed a full day's diving on this trip. When we arrived at Puntarenas we anchored in the harbor overnight waiting for a favorable tide to get to the dock. The big blessing was that the sea was absolutely calm both ways so much so that at times you could not believe that you were on a boat in the open ocean. The water temp was 76-78° F with thermoclines around 73-74. The

dinghies did not have ladders to help you get back aboard but they did have a set of handles that allowed you, with a good jump out of the water, to make it on the dinghy if you had moderate upper body strength. You could dive your own profile but you were limited to no more than 55 minutes per dive. Computers were required. The currents and surges were a problem at times (but not always) which was made more difficult because of the black sea urchins. A couple of times the surge carried me onto a sea urchin or 2. On one dive I got caught in the current and surge and subsequently the white water and it rolled me over some rocks resulting in one of my fins coming off and losing my dive buddy from visual sight. Luckily, my Apollo Bio-fins float. The diving at Cocos is not easy and one must have some visual device to signal the dingy drivers and an audio device is advisable which some divers had. If the current took you on the back side of island and the dingy driver was on the front it might be a while before you were located. Must have been a white tip shark convention. On almost every dive we saw 20-30 of them of all sizes (3-8 ft.) both free swimming and snoozing on the sand. At Submerged Rock there was a swimthrough with white tips stacked 2-3 deep on top of each other. Many small schools (3-6) of 8-10 ft. hammerhead sharks on many dives. Schools of 4-6 large eagle rays were seen on many dives and large (5-6 ft.) marble rays. Enormous schools of big-eye jacks and snappers and porgies were also present. On one dive (Ulloa Rock) we encountered 3-4

Red-lipped Bat fish that ran along the bottom on their pectoral fins when we got too close. At Silverado Point while we were watching some 6-8 ft. Silver tip sharks at a cleaning station a 18-20 ft. manta ray slowly came over us not more than 15 ft. above (we were in 35 ft. of water. We also made 2 trips ashore to swim in the pool of a waterfall and to hike up a trail for a great view of Chatham Bay. As the week wore on the inconveniences of the Okeanos did not seem to matter given what we experience while we were there. It made the adventure that much more exciting!

Okeanos Aggressor, March 2000, Jan and Terry Johnson (janefry@aol.com), Wheaton, IL. Vis: 30 to 60 ft. Water: 78 to 82 degrees, calm and flat, surge, strong currents. Dive restrictions: 55 min. dive time was not a problem. Unusual diving, many sharks, white tip and hammerheads on every dive, make Cocos a must destination for experienced divers. Unpredictable visibility and currents made diving difficult, but it was worth the effort. Boat is a little cramped, cabins small with insufficient storage for clothes but it is comfortable. We had a wonderful time. Great crew and good food. Boat trip to and from island would be unpleasant in rough seas but we had calm seas. Costa Rica a wonderful country.

Okeanos Aggressor II, June 2000, Jim Stitt, Cincinnati OH. Water: 70-75 F in south, 73-83° F at Wolf and Darwin. Vis 30-40 feet south, 50-100 ft. north but never clear. Free to dive

our own profiles, requested to stay above 130 ft. but no scuba police. Most diving Nitrox 32. Hundreds of Hammerheads and Galapagos sharks, 50+ spotted eagle rays plus 50+ mobulas at Cousins Rock. Hundreds of dolphins. At Darwin, there were dozens jumping and playing. One large dolphin stayed with us on every dive. Whale shark sightings on every dive at Darwin; on one dive, a whale shark surfaced, raised its head to look at our Zodiac, and then pushed the Zodiac in a circle with its nose! Dozens of sea turtles, several encounters with playful sea lions. Boat just refurbished; heads and showers in every cabin; AC control in each cabin; plush salon with library and video facilities; plenty of fresh water; no compromises. Service and attitude was impeccable. No situation or request that wasn't accommodated with a pleasant attitude. Quality and quantity of food were excellent; they accommodated special diet requests. All diving off 2 Zodiacs with very talented and helpful tenders; large dive platform area to dress; complete Nikonos photo rental gear; excellent souvenir video production; loaner gear available; two compressors; camera tables and rinse tank; very efficient. Continental Airlines canceled a flight (after all other connecting flights had left). When we finally arrived in Ecuador, NONE of our luggage arrived with us. This caused us to lose two days of our charter. They changed the itinerary to ameliorate the lost days caused by Continental, and located rental gear to use for the first day until our luggage arrived. They

took the responsibility of locating and retrieving our luggage and transporting it to the boat. The most exciting I have done in 20 years. The land tours are a bonus. The divemasters are certified park guides, and their knowledge of the diversity of wild life adds to the experience. We photographed nesting booby birds, sea lions, penguins, marine iguanas, frigate birds. (**Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail: info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com**)

Sea Hunter, November 1999, Jim Beyster, La Jolla, CA. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 70-75 degrees. Dive restrictions: Mod for Nitrox, no decompression diving. No dive longer than one hour. The hammerheads were there with a vengeance. On one dive at Roca Sucia a 16' baby whale shark passed just outside arms reach. Roca Sucia and Manuelita we dived the most. Hammerheads, big schools of jacks and marble rays in the currents. Best technique was to find a perch in the rocks in a high current area and watch the show. Operation and food was great. (**506-228-6613; Fax 506-289-7334; e-mail booking@underseahunter.com; website www.underseahunter.com**)

Sea Hunter, Cocos Island, January 2000, Bill Martin, Phoenix, AZ. Vis: 40-90 ft. Water: 68-78 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: Depth limits only due to our Nitrox (32/36%). Great trip! Diving the Cocos is unsurpassed. In my 21 dives more than seven days, I saw approximately 1800 white tip reef sharks, 800

stingrays, a dozen turtles, 40 dolphins, 20 pilot whales, 6 manta rays, and 300 hammerhead sharks. Weather was perfect. Some currents. Thermoclines abound. But the pelagics were all there. Great work on the *Sea Hunter* by everyone on the crew. We lacked for nothing. Their "panga" boats to each dive site were very comfortable and the crew always had all the gear set up for us. Nearly everyone got Nitrox certified on the 30-hour trip out to Cocos and we all used Nitrox all week. Very comfortable and enjoyable trip although the diving is not for beginners at the Cocos.

Sea Hunter, May 2000, C.F. Ward, San Diego, CA. Vis: 50 to 100 ft. Water: 70 to 78 degrees, calm and flat. Dive restrictions: no. Plan to arrive day before to make certain of departure time, based on tides. Boat is 2-3 hrs. from airport; has Nitrox and rebreathers. Experience mostly based on D.M. Maria Arroya is superb.

Sea Hunter, May 2000, William Reynolds, Houston, TX. Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 78-82 degrees. Dive restrictions: Nitrox, depth limitations, dive within computers; up with 500 psi. The ship was quite comfortable, roomy cabins, spacious dive deck, smooth crossings. Food very tasty in surprising variety. The dive operation is efficient and well-designed. Nitrox without detaching your equipment, very detailed briefings, divemasters helpful and knowledgeable but didn't crowd experienced divers. Safety was appropriate and continual. For large animals, Cocos is incredible. Many

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sharks, hammerheads on practically every dive, rays, lobsters, large school of jacks, etc. Our very best diving experience.

Sea Hunter, July 2000, Gary Stock, Lighthouse Point, FL. Vis: 30-100 ft. Water: 76-79 degrees. Dive restrictions: one hour bottom time. This is the best! What live-aboard diving is about. Encounters with whale sharks, mantas, marble rays, eagle rays, schooling hammerheads, silkies, white tips. The boat, crew, food and diving are an A+. Oh, forgot the humpback whale and calf!

Sea Hunter, August 2000, Tom Harvey, Hills Dale, NJ. My seventh trip to Cocos and second on the *Sea Hunter*. It gets better every trip. The *Sea Hunter* is the best equipped live-aboard I have ever seen. It has everything including the most friendly and hard-working crew. Absolute professionals. Gourmet food at every meal. Hundreds of hammers, silkies, mantas every day. Dolphins every dive. Humpback whales, sand tiger sharks 15 ft. Roger, Mario, Hugo, Jose, Beepe, Luis and the rest of the crew, I thank you with deep appreciation.

Sea Hunter, August 2000, Gregg M. Gaylord (gregg1954@aol.com), Sheboygan, WI. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 79 F. calm. The *Sea Hunter* continues to improve its already excellent operation. 4th trip to Cocos. Schools of hammerheads, white tips, silky sharks, manta and mobula rays and the occasional whale shark. Also spotted was a Sand Tiger

Shark, Frog Fish and Red Lipped Bat Fish as well as Silver Tip sharks at "Silverado." Many turtle encounters and several large groups of Eagle Rays, Marble Rays and active White Tips. An occasional Black Tip Reef Shark as well. Snorkeling encounters with Dolphins and large schools of silky sharks were frequent. Excellent snorkeling experience with a Humpback Whale surrounded by a school of loudly singing Dolphins. The weather and currents were unusually calm and dry (the rainy/winter season at Cocos) so we had the advantage of a calm surface with terrific underwater action without having to battle "rock and roll" currents. Mal de mer was not a major problem. *Sea Hunter* offers a rebreather course with the Draeger Dolphin system. I was the only "student" and had essentially private lessons. Rebreathers are an excellent way to experience the underwater wildlife of Cocos up close. Nitrox training is required before rebreather training. The extra work required to inspect your gear before and after each dive is minimal compared with the additional pleasure gained on each dive with a rebreather system. *Sea Hunter* Captain Roger, Divemasters Mario and Hugo as well as the Panga drivers, chef and crew are the best I have encountered. Avi runs a first rate operation that continues to make improvements. High standard of safety, comfort and great diving.

Undersea Hunter, Sea Hunter, August, 1999, Billy Rothschild, Elmhurst, NY. Vis: 30-85 ft. Water: 71-78 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: Nitrox 32, 36 limits. An

incredible experience. Schooling hammerheads, dozens of blacktips, silvertips, long nose sharks, lots of mobula rays, some eagle rays and a manta. Hundreds of wide-eyed jacks. You couldn't see more than a foot in front of you thru the school. Some of us saw a humpback calf whale, some dolphin turtles, dozens of lobsters. Very comfortable boat, well laid out, plenty of room. Great crew and captain! Food was excellent! Worth every penny! Go for the Nitrox. (506-228-6613; Fax 506-289-7334; e-mail booking@underseahunter.com; website www.underseahunter.com)

Undersea Hunter, Sea Hunter,
January 2000, Gregg Gaylord
(gregg54@tcbi.com), Sheboygan,
WI. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 61-78
 degrees. Weather: cloudy. Water:
 calm, currents. Restrictions: Sixty
 minute time limit. No decompression
 diving. dolphins: My 3rd *Sea Hunter*
 trip and again the style and quality of
 diving lives up to the excitement that
 precedes each trip. The boat leaves
 from the west coast of Costa Rica. I
 flew to San Jose, Costa Rica, paid for
 a cab to the Bougainvillea Hotel just
 north of San Jose. Beautiful hotel with
 a wonderful garden, bar and restaurant
 and exceptional view of San Jose
 nestled into the mountains. The
Hunter organization arranged for a bus
 to pick us up to take us to Puenternas
 where the *Sea Hunter* was docked.
 Shortly after arrival we departed for a
 30-hour trip to Cocos Island. We
 began our first dives on the morning
 of arrival with three dives daily at
 pinnacles surrounding Cocos, and an

optional night dive off the dive
 platform of the *Sea Hunter*. Nitrox
 was extra and well worth it. Taken to
 the daily dive sites — after a good
 briefing on the boat — by twin
 outboard-equipped aluminum chase
 boats that held 10 divers comfortably
 as well as the driver and divemaster.
 Gear was stored on the boats during
 the day and brought on the dive deck
 at night. We didn't have to touch a
 thing after the initial set up. Diving
 was challenging with very cold
 thermoclines and, at times, strong
 currents, but basically the dives were
 manageable as long as you were ready
 to follow the direction of the currents
 that were often not clearly known
 from the surface. A 5 mm suit with a
 hood was about the average worn by
 the divers, with many in john/jane and
 jacket combinations for the often cold
 water. A dive alert or a long safety
 sausage is a MUST. You will be
 picked up where you surface, but the
 current can take you far quickly so be
 sure to have a highly visible/audible
 alert device. Pelagics were plentiful
 though January was summer for the
 Hammerheads and they didn't need
 much cleaning. They tended to swim
 in large schools just off the pinnacles
 which was actually a beautiful sight
 on most of the dives. Thousands of
 White Tip sharks inhabit the dive sites
 and because of the thermoclines at 40
 feet, the hammerheads and white tips,
 and much other fish life, was shallow.
 It was unusual — and exciting — to
 see White Tips circling pinnacles and
 straying out into the currents instead
 of merely sitting on the sandy bottom
 as they often do. Lots of Eagle Rays,

Mobula Rays, a few Mantas and turtles. The usual huge schools of jack at Dirty Rock. Some divers saw the red lipped bat fish at Lobster Rock at the 100-foot level. Some dives began at 100 feet (like Alcyon) where the visibility happened to be poor, but we were treated to dozens of mating octopus in the daytime. The crew and divemasters were their usual outstanding selves. Captain Roger is a great skipper. The divemasters Hugo and Mario are outstanding as are the panga drivers. The food was generally excellent. There is no way to handle accidents without having to turn around, so caution is advised for those not sure of their skills.

Undersea Hunter, May 2000,
Bill and Karen Cousins,
(bcousins@ix.netcom.com), Falls
Church, VA. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet.
 Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy surge
 currents. Dive your own profile: yes.
 Dive restrictions: 130 fsw max, 60
 minutes max. An absolute peak diving
 experience. The *Undersea Hunter* is
 the real deal ... very comfortable
 although not exactly luxurious, but
 rich with diving history. Avi Klapfer
 provided interesting stories, informa-
 tion and conversation. The crew was
 attentive and knowledgeable, in
 particular our panga (skiff) driver,
 Pepe, and divemaster, Betty. We did
 24 dives in 7 days and were astounded
 nearly every dive. Dictated by weather
 conditions, we were able to dive Dirty
 Rock, Alcyone, Manuelita, Silverado,
 Dos Amigos, Punta Maria and
 Submerged Rock. We hardly knew
 where to look next ... schooling

hammerheads coming right at us out
 of the murk! A 12-foot IndoPacific
 sailfish swimming with several
 hammers! Rivers of white tips flowing
 next to rivers of marble rays! Five
 mobula rays in a squadron! Lovely
 mantas, huge and graceful, to cel-
 ebrate the occasion of my 100th dive!
 Five patrolling silvertips at a cleaning
 station ... two enormous! A young 20+
 foot whaleshark making repeated
 passes as we watched mesmerized.
 Silkies circling, wahoos, eagle rays, a
 lone oceanic blacktip, jacks schooling
 by the hundreds, octopi and morays of
 all varieties swimming freely. Cocos is
 diving paradise. We rented and dove
 Draeger Dolphin rebreathers for two
 days and wished for more ... Betty
 dove rebreather also and showed us
 special care. The DMs strongly
 encourage Nitrox use to extend no-
 deco times. On this trip, our panga had
 6 divers and the other had 7, never
 diving the same site simultaneously.
 The DMs do prefer that the group stay
 loosely together due to the changing
 and frequently strong currents, and do
 request the 60-minute limit. The
Hunters are serious about not losing
 divers. For variety, we swam ashore to
 visit a gorgeous waterfall (one of
 dozens on this enchanted island) and
 look at the interesting rock carvings,
 admired the booby babies nesting on
 Manuelita during a sunset panga
 cruise, snorkeled with dolphins, and
 rescued a large hawksbill sea turtle
 who had a rope tied around one
 flipper. The 36-hour passage out to
 Cocos was moderately rocky (3 out of
 13 guests were seasick); on the gentler
 return, we stopped mid-Pacific and

swam just for fun. By the way, *Sea Hunter* also made this trip and we spent several evenings aboard with friends. She is bigger and more luxurious, but we preferred the cozy *Undersea Hunter*.

ECUADOR

***Flamingo*, Eco Ventura, June 2000, Vickie Nelson, Cumming, GA.**

Water: 70-72 degrees. Land excursions were nice. Sea lions on the beach. The blue-footed booby birds doing their dance. On two dives, the sea lions dive bombed us. Diving was very rough with 5 ft. seas normal. The current was very strong. Visibility was 30 to 40 ft. Only one whitetip shark, no schools of hammerheads (the explanation of course: they were here last week!). Octopus, two spotted eagle rays, thousands of yellow-tailed surgeonfish swimming with me. Everyone wore 7 mm. I wore 5 mm, dives at Gordon rocks, Cousins rock, Enderby, and Champion. We did not go to Darwin and Wolf. The first afternoon on a buoyancy check they instructed us to start with 30 lbs. of weight and a hood. 12 divers were getting ready in a very small and people were getting cuts and scraps from the tanks and bumping into each other. On the check out I sank like a rock. When I made it to the surface, I found myself struggling then drifting away from the ship and got a strong breath of the diesel fumes coming from the back of the ship. The combination put me in a panic. I am a comfortable diver with good diving skills, but I signaled the ship that I

was in trouble. The divemaster Fabrese kept asking if I were OK? I gave the distress signal three times and realized that I had better focus on saving myself. I pumped in my BC and was still drifting far away from the ship, I turned over and just started to breathe slowly and was no longer taking in the diesel fumes. After five minutes, the dinghy came to rescue me. I hadn't up my equipment. They exhausted me. There was no ladder and I needed assistance. The crew member tried to help me. We were unable to communicate since he could not speak English. He wasn't able to help me by himself. He was starting to let go when I then landed on the side of the wood boat with my right side banging into the side of the boat and I hit real hard into one of the metal screws on top of the boat. I later found out that when I gave the distress signal, the crew members didn't know what to do. Two of the women divers on board were getting ready to jump in and save me. I would not let this get in the way of diving so I readjusted my weights and wore 20 lbs. dove the next day. Two female divers did not dive due to what they witnessed as lack of emergency skills and any type of emergency training from the crew. Later that evening, five of the passengers spoke with the Tour Operator about safety issues. He didn't care. On the second dive that day the conditions were extreme. We only had one divemaster with a group of 10 divers. The divemaster was assisting another diver and lost the group. Later that evening on June 3rd, the *Flamingo* was traveling at full speed in rough