

MEXICO

***Solmar V*, August 1999, David**

Thompson, Radnor, PA. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 80-85 degrees. Restrictions: 130'. Lots of sea lions, a delight. Mantas, morays, in general good sea life. Great service, good food — too much food! Good accommodations. (800-344-3349, 310-459-9861; Fax: 310-454-1686; e-mail: CaboResort@aol.com; website www.solmar.com)

***Solmar V*, November 1999, David Marchese, Hummelstown, PA**

(dmarchese@mbakercorp.com). Vis: 25-60 ft. Water: 71-78 degrees. Weather: sunny, dry. Water: choppy, no currents. Dive Restrictions: 130' max.. The *Solmar V* boat is nice. Everything is kept very clean and in proper repair. Our Superior accommodations were quite adequate. Floors are carpeted and all the trim is mahogany. The bottom bunk was plenty large enough for my wife and me to share (but we are both small: 5'-8" and 5'-4"). We used the top bunk as a shelf. This combined with the very small closet, the single small drawer, and the hull-side cubby holes provided ample storage space (less than other live-aboards). Had we been unable to share the bottom bunk, the storage space would have been pretty tight. The combination shower/head was large enough for two and had unending hot water and high water pressure. Though they nicely appoint the community salon and large, it is long and narrow and required that the guests (22 of us — full boat) dine or lounge in separate groups. There are

two booths (5 seats each) and two small tables (2 seats each) along each side, but no couches or freestanding chairs. The rear upper sun deck has 9 lounge chairs and the bow has a large pad that will accommodate about 6. There was an unending supply of beach towels. The 23-hour journey out to San Benedicto was loud. With the ship under way, the hull vibrates pretty badly and my head and teeth rattled. Amazingly I was able to sleep. The food was great. Breakfast started with large platters of cut fruit; a good stock of cereal and milk; and Danish-type baked items (not fresh, but good). After this, the main breakfast arrived: pancakes, French toast, poached eggs, or a variety of traditional Mexican things — beans and chips etc. Lunches and dinners consisted of salad, soup, entrée, and dessert. No one should lose weight on this trip! All meals were on table cloths and were served efficiently and cheerfully by Pepe. Men were asked to wear shirts during meals; women were allowed to dine in bikini tops. No men complained. The diving? Fantastic, but unique. Each dive was for a particular animal. Unlike most other places, where divers swim or drift over reefs looking for small or large critters, dives here were often through bottomless blue water to encounter tuna, schools of tropicals, dolphins, sharks, or rays. And they were encountered on all but two of our 18 dives (5 days of 3 to 4 dives each). We swam with dolphins and sharks simultaneously, schools of silkys, schools of hammerheads, schools of tuna, and 15' mantas. There was also a

dive where caves were filled with 6' to 8' white tips! There are no reefs (or only very minimal reefs on a few dives) but tons of in-your-face big critters. The mantas swam with us (inches away) for 30 minutes, the sharks often got feet away, and the dolphins (one dive only) were pretty playful. We were fortunate enough to get to Roca Partida where the density of sharks and fish was even higher. The seas can be rough, the panga rides (half our dives were from pangas — 11 divers in each) were often exciting; when the surf was up, and the bottomless deep dives make this a place for experienced divers only. There were 22 of us on the boat and the requirement that all main-ship diving be done off the port side often made for a long line of anxious divers. I never understood why all diving had to be off the port side, but we managed. Also, all divers donned their own equipment on deck and walked to the side. Afterwards, fins were handed up and we walked back to our assigned stations to remove equipment: no don't-lift-a-finger-we-will-do-it-all Caribbean-type service here. Excellent trip, excellent boat, and excellent crew.

Solmar V/Amigos Del Mar, February 2000, Clinton Bauder
(gecko1@apple.com), Cupertino, CA. Vis: 30 to 90 feet. Water: 72 to 78 F. choppy surge. Dive restrictions: 130 Feet max, No deco diving, no night diving, no solo diving (sort of - same ocean same day was OK so long as somebody else was in the water). Enforcement lax — which was OK with me. Big animal diving was really

great. Lots of mantas and sharks and a really great hammerhead dive. Lots of humpback whales on the surface but none seen underwater. Two divers had a really great dive with porpoise. Reef a bit dull. Smattering of hard corals, occasional gorgonians and sponges. Some jewels like barnacle blennies if you looked hard enough. Also lots of large morays, big schools of jacks and many octopi. Divemasters seemed rather bored with the routine. Briefings were good but otherwise they mostly seemed there just to record our max depth and time after a dive. Didn't bother to help point things out or describe the marine life. Wanted \$100 for a PADI Manta Ray specialty. Why should I pay extra for a divemaster to tell me about local critters? One DM scared away a school hammerheads on a dive by swimming directly at them. Several dive sites were world class for big animals but the boat needs to explore more. They seemed to like the routine of parking the boat in one place and leaving it there for an entire day. I got the feeling they did the same 5 dive sites every trip. They might do less on some trips. We were told at first that Roca Partida and the Boiler weren't diveable due to weather conditions. This turned out to be a comfort issue rather than a safety problem and we soon set them straight. This shouldn't have happened. We didn't come all that way to be sit in protected anchorages — we came to dive with Señor Big! Make sure this is made clear to the crew. Boat doesn't fill Nitrox that is a pain given the dive profiles. Otherwise the boat is setup well for

diving with a nice swimstep, multiple rinse buckets and nice dive stations for gear storage. Food generally good but overly rich and they never did figure out each person's likes, dislikes and special dietary needs. Cabins very small but did have working AC and small TVs. The rest of the boat was very nice. Trip was a good value for big animal diving. UW Photography comments: Nice camera table, 4 rinse buckets — two of which were just for cameras. Bring your own adapter for 220 power. No PAL TV sets.

***Solmar V*, Amigos Del Mar, February 2000, G. Evan Weeth, Redwood City, CA.** Vis: 30 to 80 feet. Water: 69 to 73 degrees, choppy, surge, strong currents. Dive restrictions: 130 feet. No dive for 24 hours if you went into deco on your computer. Quarters were clean, but cramped—approx. 42 sq. ft. Food very good served in excessive quantities. Dive Masters very knowledgeable of area. Gave good briefings before each series of dives. Subject to above restrictions, stick with your partner and dive your own profile. Overall excellent operation. No night dives due to excessive shark activity.

***Solmar V*, May 2000, Dennis Marguet, Pleasanton, CA.** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 60-71 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. No drinking and diving. The friendliest mantas in the world. You can pet them but not ride them. They will hover over you for easy belly rubs. There are shark dives but go for the mantas. Better than Yap and Kona, Hawaii. Great food, hotel style. Had prime rib

and lobster for dinner. The rooms are adequate. Very little room for storage so bring as few clothes as possible. Diving in 65-70 degree water starts to get cold. Bring more than a 3-mil suit, for sure a hood.

***Solmar V*, May 2000, Mary and George Jonilonis, Del Mar, CA.** Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 72-75 degrees. Dive restrictions: Supposed 130' Nobody checked. Small cabins. We had an upgrade and it was pretty claustrophobic. Salon small but nice. Crew very good, especially Geronimo. Fluent English. Always helping. Divemaster Jose Luis, helpful, right there. Strong currents, 5+ surface swells and jelly fish. They hit many of us with very painful stings. The only sun we saw was the 22-hr back to Cabo. Lost diving until 2:00 PM one day waiting for Mexican Navy to board our boat and check us out. Rudeness, certainly didn't care about divers. Since *Solmar* does this every week from Dec. to May it's not like they weren't expecting us. The Islands are a preserve and so no gloves or lights. On first day surge so bad a/w one woman thrown against rocks. Cut her hand to bone. One dive, 4 of us got in a current and came up way too close to breakers crashing over rocks. Jelly fish were attacking us on hands and faces at surface. Jose Luis was stung repeatedly and needed medical attention on boat. We were the first boat at San Benedicto after Mexican fishing trawlers had been there. The sharks were not as promised and usually we had one manta, sometimes two, once 3, mantas. All diving deep from support boats.

Solmar V, July 2000, Gloria Davis, St. James, MO. Vis: 20-80 ft. Water: 81-86 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130'. Boat very good, food excellent, crew helpful. Very safe diving. Anytime divers in the water there were safety boats out. Sometimes the boat would anchor, secure a line between the boat and dive site and have open diving after a detailed briefing. Dive deck was convenient and air fills prompt. No strong currents. Most dives 60 ft. or so deep. Nudibranchs everywhere, macro heaven. We were not able to dive with sea lions as it was mating season and the bulls didn't want us around. A snorkeler from another boat got a nasty bite from a bull when she got between him and his females. The diving was much better in the north but no coral reefs. Lots of marine life but mostly small, no sharks but did see 12 mobula rays, schools of puffer fish. Los Islotes had the most beautiful night dive in the swim thru. On El Islote we saw a huge red snapper 200 lbs. and up. Saw many varied and beautiful nudibranchs and several octopi, lots of zebra and jeweled eels. At El Bajo we saw huge schools of tuna. Pretty average diving with a few highlights but the crew made the trip. *Solmar V* was one of the cleanest I've seen, not one bug all week. Food was good and plentiful, rooms small but comfortable, plenty of hot water.

Solmar V, September 2000, Kathy Riddle, Econ, OH. Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 80-85 degrees on the surface. Overall weather: sunny dry. Water: choppy, surge, strong currents.

Thermoclines on many dives. Wore diveskin/shorty. Could dive own profile, 130' max; no deco. Hurricane Lane passed by Cabo San Lucas the day we were to depart so were delayed about 18 hours. We were put up at no cost at the Solmar Suites and provided dinner. Taken to boat early the next day to await suitable conditions. It was very rough for about 8 hours. The crew did all that was possible to make divers comfortable. This was to be a 4-day cruise and management offered to stay out an extra day on the end to make up for the day lost in the beginning. All passengers but one changed their plane reservations (at own expense) to stay out. Management arranged for the one who could not change plans to be ferried to nearest city and transported to airport in time for flight. Standard cabins were tight but doable. However, two cabins in bow of boat, # 201 and #203, were VERY small. For this trip they served as singles, but when boat is full, they would have 2 divers in each and it would be most uncomfortable. Floor space for those cabins is literally 2' x 2'. We had 18 divers, one snorkeler, and 10 crew. Meals were excellent, served hot, quickly and efficiently by Pepe. The menu was a mixture of Spanish and American entrees, including lobster, prime rib, and grilled T-bones. Breakfast was an assortment of cold cereals, rolls, eggs (Spanish recipes), waffles, pancakes, and fruit. Lunches were hot soup and entrees. Dinner had salad, meat or seafood, vegetables, and dessert. There was always a big platter of fresh fruit available and snacks in the

afternoon. The dive deck was well organized and roomy. Each diver had an individual station with equipment bin below. There was a camera only table with storage table below that, separate rinse barrels for cameras and equipment, 2 fresh water showers, towels, and white board for briefings. A top deck allowed for lounging and sunning. Racks on both sides of the boat allowed for hanging of wetsuits to dry. Louis and Alex were experienced divemasters while Pedro is new and still learning the sites. All were cheerful and helpful, doing their best to enable us to have great dives and see the things we came to see. There were always 2 divemasters in the water if you chose to go with them. On a couple of sites, we signed up into groups and were taken at different times or to different sites in the same area. The sea lions, mantas, hammerheads, turtles and sting rays generated the most excitement. There were thousands of starfish and king angel fish, lots of morays, Moorish idols, parrotfish, puffers, and many of the usual tropicals. Lots of small stuff to see when current died down. Many dives were drift dives because of the current, which was quite strong at times. Two pangas were utilized for pick up and the terrific drivers were always there to pick you up wherever you surfaced so you didn't have to ration your air to make sure you got back to the boat. We went north of La Paz and then worked our way back south toward Cabo San Lucas. We had dive sites at La Reina, Las Animas, El Bajo, the sea lion colony at Los Islotes, and Cabo Pulmo. 4-5 dives

could be done each day and the divemasters were always willing. There is only a small area where corals thrive so most of the seascape is boulders and rocky areas. Night dives were available each night. The female sea lions were friendly and playful while the bulls kept a watchful eye. A squadron of mantas was seen at Cabo Pulmo. On the last night, the boat stopped at Pelican Rock/Sand Falls in Cabo San Lucas Bay for a last night dive for those that wished. We then docked. Got a departure briefing for the next morning, and the rest of the evening could be spent in the town.

PANAMA

Coiba Explorer II, July 1999,
Lauren Henderson, San Antonio, TX. Vis: 20 - 60 ft. Water: 78-82 degrees. Adventure diving off the beaten path. Second summer of diver operation. Personal service from the time you arrive in Panama City. Transfers handled by Coiba operation. 115 ft. spacious boat; comfortable cabins, bar area, lovely open air diving area salon, for video viewing and lots of fresh hot water for rinsing and showers. 12 divers max. Good food and snacks. Crew is wonderful. Diving is done from two 28 ft. Pursuits with 6 divers each. Two am dives then return to mother ship for lunch and rest. Two pm dives. Night dives offered 3 nights. We fished for tuna and snapper during surface intervals on Pursuits. Dive instructor/master Kevin and captain Kid did a wonderful job locating good dive spots. Attention to safety due to depth,