

through, including several caves, caverns, and lava tubes. Hawaii diving is not Palau, but it is a significant world dive spot. I'm glad I went. Like the Red Sea, it has many fish and critters indigenous only to Hawaii. I snorkeled with the mantas and dolphins. The highlight was a close encounter with a 40-ft whale shark. I took superb video of everything including octopus, turtles, and many small night critters. I enjoyed the trip immensely. Dale Franklin former instructor on Guam, now in Houston, very competent, positive, upbeat, safety conscious and committed.

MICRONESIA

Palau

Big Blue Explorer, February 2000, Nancy Simon. Water: 85-90 degrees. Boat was kept clean; hot water installed after 3 days. Crew was accommodating, dive masters excellent. Food plentiful, not gourmet but well prepared. Diving was fantastic. Sensory overload of sea life. German channel, Ulong Channel and Blue holes and Blue corner were unbelievable. (877-348-3475, 562-865-7198; Fax 562-809-7300; e-mail explorer@palauscuba.com; website www.palauscuba.com)

Big Blue Explorer, June 2000, Ronald Bailey (rlbailey@rbnet.com), Roanoke, VA. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: No deco requested, and suggested dive times, but we dove our computers.

The *Big Blue Explorer* has 9 cabins, which are very large. The B deck cabins are a little larger than the A deck cabins. Bathrooms in the cabins are about 5 ft. by 5.5 ft. with hot water showers. Bunks are comfortable, clean and made up daily. Air conditioned throughout. Only five of us on the 165 ft. boat. Plenty of room to get lost on the ship. Food was good to very good. Crew was excellent. Dive guides did a good to excellent job. Breakfast room and TV lounge were plenty large enough. Upper dining room also large and covered. Plenty of storage for gear and after dive showers. No complaints from anyone about the boat/facilities. The best dives were Blue Corner, New Drop Off and Turtle Cove with wall to our right side. Saw more sharks and schools of fish at these sites. Other sites were good to average. Currents there were light to none most dives. Five dives/day offered. Crew accommodated our suggestion for 3 dives during the day with a twilight fourth dive near the end of the week. A little less hectic that way. Got in 25 dives. Saw dolphins on way back from dive and managed some snorkel time with them. Also got close to pilot whales off Angaur. Did not get to dive Peleliu due to surface conditions. For the reduced price compared to the well-known live-aboards and the amount of space on board, the *Big Blue Explorer* is a bargain. Separate enclosed camera room with shelves. Room enough to work on cameras. Plenty of camera only rinse buckets on the live-aboard and rinse bucket on dive skiff. Crew would also carry camera to/from dive skiff if you wished. Also handed and

retrieved camera to divers in the water. Would also process your film.

Ocean Hunter, November 1999, R. Moore (padidm@earthlink.net), Vista, CA. Vis: 75-150 ft. Water: 83-85 degrees. Dive restrictions: None. Wonderful! *Ocean Hunter* only takes six divers with a crew on 3. Best trip ever, great service from outstanding crew. Always did at least 4 dives a day, more were available but we passed. The captain or DM went in with us but usually went back after 45 min or so. The rest of us usually did over an hour each time. Most diving is from the main boat so no pangas. Dive when you want and stay as long as you want. First class organization.

Palau Aggressor, January 2000, Walt Brenner, Wayne, PA. Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 85-86 degrees. Good size catamaran with only 6-foot draft but cabins for 16. Having only 12 divers provided a little extra room. I have been on at least a dozen live-aboards from the Caribbean to Thailand but this was without question the finest — large, roomy en-suite cabins with plenty of storage space and a full window, the most efficient dive operation I have ever seen, a large, well-equipped galley with a gourmet cook, plenty of space in the combined dining/lounge area plus a bar also opening to the outside, and half the top deck for sunning and relaxing. Cabins are on the same level as the dive deck so entry and exit could not be more convenient. Palau diving is noted for its variety and abundance of reef life, pelagics, and reef structures

— and I was not disappointed. Reef hooks are used because of the strong currents to allow better observation of the sharks, Napoleon wrasses, turtles, jacks, tunas, wahoos, and even some manta rays. It was actually a boon to photography allowing both hands free while hanging in the current. I added many new species to my observation record. This was another 4-5 dive per day experience with visibility 80 to 100 feet and water temperature 85-86°. Weather was considerably better than Chuuk — more sun and less rain. Great diving, great food, and a great ship. (**Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail: info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com**)

Palau Aggressor, May 2000, Yong Choi, Palo Alto, CA. Vis: 15-60 ft. Water: 81-83 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 150 ft. Bad weather, currents, visibility and the storm kept us from Blue Hole and Blue Corner and Ulong Channel Monday thru Thursday. They told us that about 50% of the coral has recovered from El Niño. Tanja was a great Captain who tried to find sites in bad weather. One dive operator lost a diver Monday. We were fortunate to dive Blue Hole and Blue Corner on the last day. We were disappointed using hooks at Blue Corner. Cabins have air conditioning but are small with storage space for two divers. It felt good when the divemaster passed around hot towels after a dive. Jellyfish Lake was good for hiking and snorkeling. Land tour of Peleliu was interesting for learning about WWII. Regarding gratuities

offered 5-10% of the Charter price. You may pay by cash or credit card. The crew's attitude and service were excellent. Eric did good food for divers. You need extra weights for aluminum tank 80. \$60 video is not worth it. Spectacular view Blue Corner and Seventy Islands from air charter flight by Belau Air Inc. Tel (680) 587-2456 Fax: (680) 587-2457. **(011-680-488-2637; Fax 011-680-488-5418; e-mail: Ocean.Hunter@palaunet.com; www.oceanhunter.com)**

Palau Aggressor, July 2000, M.J. Benenson, Weston, NY. Vis: 100-150 ft. Water: 79-81 degrees. Dive restrictions: 1 hour and computer. Returned trip after 5 years. Coral not as good, jellyfish lake decimated. Fish life great, wall dives up to expectations. Great sharks. Blue corner and blue hole always great.

Star Dancer, March 2000, Bradley Bowen, Farmington, UT. Vis: 35 to 200 Feet. Water: 75 to 87 F. We complained about diving the same sites repeatedly, and were discretely informed by crew that nearly all of the corals at other sites had been killed by the warm El Niño waters during the past couple of years. On one dive they took us to one of the few sites supposed to still be "good." It did have a couple of large schools of Moorish Idols, and an abundance of other reef fishes. However, roughly 60% of the coral was completely bleached. We saw hundreds of sharks, which made the trip "worth it." We only saw one small Manta Ray at the back of our boat one evening. As we

were leaving Saturday, a fishing boat came in and parked directly in front of us. We watched in horror as 26 huge loggerhead turtles and a small manta ray were loaded off boat and hauled off in a small truck to local restaurants. The crew tried to placate a boat full of furious divers by telling us this had never happened before, and that the government allowed the harvesting of turtles once a year. The Turtles were still alive, and they were so big that they could only fit one turtle at a time in the bed of the truck they were using, and the turtle had to be put on its side because they were too big to lay flat in the bed of the truck. My wife and I were horrified that prime breeding turtles likely aged at least 75 to 130 years were being slaughtered in this manner. Most divers had photography equipment, and crew were very helpful in handing equipment back and forth to divers in the water or who were exiting. Very large photo tables on the boat, with compressed air hoses for cleaning/drying equipment, good lighting, recharge area for batteries, etc. **(800-932-6237; 305-669-9391; Fax 305-669-9475; e-mail dancer@peterhughes.com; website www.peterhughes.com)**

Star Dancer, March 2000, Mimi Wong (spahkee@juno.com), Saint Paul, MN. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F., calm. Restrictions: 130' 60 minutes 500 psi. Overall Fish life was prolific though people who had been to Palau 10 years ago commented on how much the population had gone down. Go there before the Taiwanese fishermen decimate the

waters. Wide range in terms of coral health — despite all the reports on coral bleaching, we were able to find some sites with quite a bit of coral, both soft and hard. The best part are the dives like Blue Corner and Peleliu where the current rip-roars and the large schools of fish and sharks come in while you are floating above the reef using a reef hook secured to your BC. We did Blue Corner 3 times, each a different time of day. Each dive was an exhilarating experience with different levels of current and varying amount of fish life — generally in proportion to current. Macro critters were not as plentiful as other places we have gone diving. The *Star Dancer* is immaculate and well kept throughout — staterooms, public areas, tender, etc. are in great shape and are set up with the diver in mind. The free beverages, particularly the juices were welcome after dives. The live-aboard experience allowed us to get to sites early and avoid the hour long rides common with the land-based operators. While usually in PNG, *Star Dancer* spent part Spring 2000 with the *Sun Dancer* in Palau. The crew was not as knowledgeable about various sites, etc. as we would have liked. The captain and cook were moving off to the Turks and Caicos operation, a new crew member was on his second week and finally, another crew member was sulking about a performance issue. This left the hospitality part of the Peter Hughes experience a notch below. Food was not up to the standards — snacks were usually institutional and meager. Special requests such as “no red meat”

were not acknowledged or honored. Compared to Pam’s cooking on the *Nekton Pilot*, this was a letdown in terms of quality and quantity. Both the *Aggressor* and Peter Hughes operations in Palau spend 2 full days in the lagoon where you don’t get the visibility and fish life you experience outside the lagoon. This amounts to 33% of your live-aboard time diving sites that have less than great visibility. While we got to dive 2 WWII wrecks within the lagoon, the lack of visibility made it a less satisfying experience than we would have liked. Overall, I’d recommend Palau as a destination, despite the 20-some hour flight. Do a live-aboard however, what we experienced was probably not worth the \$2200/person.

***Star Dancer*, April 2000, Allen Tisch, Cornwall on Hudson, NY.** Vis: 100 to 110 ft. Water: 82 to 85 degrees, moderate currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: 130’ max; divemasters (1 or 2) kept an eye on everyone. The boat-all around best we’ve been on, and Manthiri is tough act to follow. Crew 3 rated captains on board, each interesting and enthusiastic. Crew well-organized — no touching gear except to put it on, take off in water and hand it up. When tender motor died, captain hired 2 local boats by next dive. Food interesting, well made. The diving, for a PNG-based boat, divemasters knew sites quite well. Much more convenient than our land-based stay at Palau Pacific 7 years earlier. Neither *Dancer* goes very far at night, i.e., Kayangel, Lighthouse Channel, but we had the

best sites to ourselves when the tide was right; incoming, but not blow your mask off. Great vis, sharks, cudas schools, lovely cuttlefish, clown triggers, idol schools, eagle rays. Peleliu mind-boggling for sharks. Land visit worthwhile for WWII revisit; guns, tanks, tunnels. Lots of beautiful tropicals including the gorgeous mandarin fish in Riso inlet. Coral in better shape than I had expected. Some fabulous coral gardens now just OK. The land — Rock Islands with Japanese seaplane wrecks and caves, the sand at beautiful Ulong Island beach — superb. All in all Palau is still a great destination for most divers.

Sun Dancer II, December 1999, Paul McFall (pemcfall@yahoo.com), Atlanta, GA. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F. Stay above 130 ft., use computer. Had a great week. The service was excellent. The diving was out of this world. No complaints about the diving; sharks, turtles, mantas, schooling barracuda, cuttlefish. Two complaints about the boat: too much time spent at the dock in Koror the first and last day and the captain should be in charge of the boat and crew, not his wife. Neither spoiled the trip for me, but fixing these two things would make it better. (800-932-6237; 305-669-9391; Fax 305-669-9475; e-mail dancer@peterhughes.com; website www.peterhughes.com)

Sun Dancer II, December 1999, Nick Roger-Vasselin, Reno, NV. Visibility 60 to 100 feet. Water 82-86. Second trip aboard the *Sun Dancer* in two

years, coral damage not as bad as expected. Very smooth operation run by a professional staff who do their job very well, but their heart didn't seem to be in it, although every one except Jan, was nice, and knowledgeable. Jan, the captain's wife complained on a daily basis about missing her home, and griped about other staff members. Also a divemaster on board whose idea of being a divemaster consists in waiting until everyone is in the water and then goes off by herself with no concern for anyone's safety. Food is excellent, dive deck is nicely set up and clean. Really liked the warm water showers on the dive deck. E6 processing daily. Palau is still one of our favorite places. Lots of big fish action and a lot of critters. Something for everyone. Make sure Mandarin fish lake is one of the dives scheduled. Would recommend a day of kayaking through the Rock islands before boarding the ship. We went with Sam's dive tours and they took us out with a marine biologist who is very knowledgeable. Snorkel in the Rock islands and see lots of Juveniles that you don't see on the reef while diving. Stayed at the Caroline resort for one night, half the price of the PPR and what a view of the Rock islands when you wake up.

Sun Dancer, January/February 2000, Mr. and Mrs. H. Kimberger, Austria. Vis: 100-200 ft. Water: 28 C. We were given guidelines but it was our responsibility to make our profile. They should have told us that the diving would be only 8.5 days when we paid for a 10 days diving

package. Although there was plenty of white and blush wines on board, after two days we were told there was no more red wine due to a shortage on the main island. However, when we returned Friday to Koror, there was no such shortage and plenty of bottles could be found on the shelves in the stores! Nice boat and nice accommodation but diving rather disappointing. When we dove there ten years ago, it was an absolute diving paradise. Today, Palau lives on its reputation but for how long? The corals are very damaged and bleached. Went three times to Blue corner but refused to go there a fourth time. In eight days of diving (not including the last two shallow dives), seven dive sites were repetitive (i.e. 14 dives). There are 75 registered diving sites in Palau and, while not expecting to go everywhere, we certainly did not understand why we had to remain six days in one spot when we had excellent weather. (Only the last four days were windy and raining). If a buoy had to be repaired or replaced (as was the case), it should have been done when paying passengers were not on board. Except diving Pelilu corner did the boat move to the outside reef. The purpose of choosing a dive boat is precisely to have the opportunity of "exploring" as many dive sites as possible for a dive adventure as you call it. Otherwise it is simply a floating hotel. Another suggestion is that it would be much better if the two boat tenders would split, thus avoiding 20 divers at the same spot. (There are already so many divers on the popular sites). Since there are 2 dives in the morning and 2 in

the afternoon, this could easily be done but it would, of course, require more dive management. One last disturbing point is the 10% tip of the total cost of the diving package that is expected (if not required). It certainly is never mentioned anywhere in the world when staying at a hotel with a dive package.

Sun Dancer II, February 2000, Skip and Mary Harutun, Carbondale, CO. Vis: 80 to 110 ft. Water: 80 to 83 degrees, choppy, surge. Dive your own profile: Yes. Dive restrictions: Come back safely. The coral in Palau is virtually dead; looks like diving the moon. El Niño strikes again. *Sun Dancer* dumps all 19-20 divers from both tenders on same site every dive; spent 2 nights out of 7 night trip tied to a smelly, noisy industrial dock with the *Star Dancer* and *Palau Aggressor*; entire trip might have covered 30 miles total; never out of sight of at least 1 other live-aboard, usually 2 or 3; no new dive sites, just by the numbers; ie: #74, #68, #25, etc. Lazy operations for dive sites, nothing out of the ordinary. If it's Thursday it must be Blue Corner, which isn't that special. Peter, take a superior boat and crew and let's do some real adventure creative live-aboard diving elsewhere.

Sun Dancer II, March 2000, W. Alan Richardson (alanjane@cwo.com) Byron, CA. Best boat in fleet. *Star Dancer* was there and looked old and rundown. Capt. Alan and wife, Jan. excellent hosts; food and service on boat excellent. Divemasters more interested in photo ops than in dive group; some older divers asked for but

did not receive much help; seas calm with light winds; one tender out of service for engine change (local boat used). Beautiful coral walls, especially soft corals, good macro; 2 dives at Blue Corner, one in strong current; 1 dive Pelelili corner in very strong current; only a few divers made it to site and 3 reef hooks snapped in half.

Sun Dancer, April 2000, Walt and Angie Redmond, Austin, TX. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 85, calm currents. Dive your own profile. Any dive restrictions: Depth. Great accommodations and food. Diving was superb. Nitrox at no charge. Lots of sharks and fish every dive. We could see the effect of El Niño, bleached coral at several dive sites. Best dive was Cuttlefish City as 4 cuttlefish hung around for the entire dive. When we requested a wreck dive, they willingly accommodated with Chuyo Mayo, a Japanese merchant ship pressed into service and sunk during WWII. No jellyfish in Jellyfish Lake, so did Chandelier Cave instead, and got a taste of cave diving. Divemasters gave dive briefings and filled tanks but otherwise not much help. Yanis, chef, prepared incredible meals. No charge for sodas, drinks and always food available. Special diets were willingly accommodated. We did a land tour on Peleliu that gave us a snapshot history lesson from WWII. Captain Alan and his wife, Jan, were friendly and willing to assist as needed. We spent 20-30 minutes traversing to every dive site, so we were more tired that rested for being on a live-aboard. You could do 4-5

dives per day. Besides the 4-5 live-aboards in the area, dayboats also come out to the same sites. The chance of encountering other divers is high. We spent the first night in port at the dock as some passengers arrived on a late flight. We also spent the next to last night in the harbor and then the last night in port at the dock. If the Peter Hughes office had informed us about this, we would have scheduled a flight out on the last night in port and then overnights in Hawaii to avoid the 19+ hours spent flying home. It was hard to get consistent information from the main office.

Sun Dancer II, May 2000, Doris and Bob Schaffer, Fallbrook, CA. Vis: 30 to 110 ft. Water: 82 to 84 degrees, choppy, surge, strong currents. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: none. The most comfortable of all Peter Hughes boats, and the others are great. Crew excellent, friendly and accommodating, wonderful meals and nice amenities. Outstanding diving. Didn't see too much coral bleaching. No currents at Peleliu or Blue Corner, which was unusual but still very exciting dives with lots to see. Much drift diving. Minor negative: dives are long, averaging 50 minutes, so diving is rushed and surface intervals are insufficient. So use good judgment and sit out a dive or two. One or two wreck dives with poor visibility because the silt gets kicked up. This was our 21st live-aboard and 3rd trip to Palau and it ranks up there in the top four all-around diving experiences.

PS: I was rather amused by the “negatives” mentioned in your *Undercurrent* report which, frankly, sounded like so much whining! So the boat was “sitting in a scummy harbor filled with land/sea containers” and it wasn’t pretty. Big deal. The *Sun Dancer II* is there because that’s where it takes on passengers, gear, fuel and supplies and there is no other prettier place in Koror to accommodate the dive boats. So the boat didn’t leave the same evening the passengers boarded because it was low tide and they got a late start the next morning. Big deal. In that environment, it’s pretty easy to adjust, as you did the minute you got into the water. So the lunches were too heavy to be followed by an afternoon of diving. Big deal. Use some control and eat less! I suspect what you interpreted as Jan’s rudeness by “loudly complaining” and “showing displeasure to the passengers” was merely her dry sense of humor. She knows that the passengers don’t have any control about when they return to the boat for meals; they rely on the divemasters to brief and get them into the water and they rely on the tender drivers to get them back to the boat. If passengers would rather shower and be late for dinner, they are still graciously served. The one thing I do agree with (my dive buddy husband has a different opinion) is that they rush the diving. I was diving Nitrox and still felt the surface intervals were not long enough, so I used my own good judgment and sat out a few dives. Why do divers on a live-aboard feel compelled to get their money’s worth by diving every single

dive offered and disregard the risks? These are the same people, I suppose, who “pig out” at buffets and ignore the health implications.

Truk

Truk Aggressor, January 2000, Walt Brenner, Wayne PA. Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 84-85 degrees. When I started diving in 1971, “Truk” and “Micronesia” were words spoken in awe. These were the Nirvanas, the unachievable paradise spots of the diving world. Having waited all these years for just the right time (not to mention a pot full of money) I decided the year 2000 was it! It is a long, hard trip from the east coast, but truly the “trip of a lifetime,” worth every penny. By using Continental from the USA one is eligible for a special all-inclusive island air fare that keeps down the overall cost. Nevertheless, it is all but impossible to avoid overnighing in Guam whenever changing destinations. I opted for a couple of days at the pleasant and comfortable Blue Lagoon Lodge on Chuuk. It is a quiet motel-style resort in a coconut grove on the water. (Actually built on what remains of a Japanese seaplane base — the airplane ramp is still visible at the water’s edge). The *Aggressor* is a fine example of this topnotch fleet with only half (6) the usual compliment of guests. A nice plus. Cabins are en-suite, ample size, plenty of hot water, good though not sensational food, roomy dive deck, and an extremely efficient dive operation not to mention a most amiable crew. No problem

doing 4-5 dives every day. Depths ranged from 60 to 130 feet and water temperature was 84-85°. Visibility was between 30 and 50 feet. The weather was not the greatest but this was the “best” time to be there — a mixture of sun, clouds, and an occasional rain shower. Nothing to influence the diving adversely. Of about 60 Japanese shipwrecks, close to 40 are “divable.” However, due to the ravages of time, depths, visibility, and distance, going to some is not the best use of your time — so a well-chosen 15 seemed quite sufficient for one week. Just about all wrecks in the lagoon, which is 25 miles across, are the result of a massive allied carrier raid in February 1944, which lasted two days and virtually wiped out Japan’s supply and storage facilities for its far-flung South Pacific island empire. Much of this materiel is still plainly visible — land tanks, trucks, motorcycles, fully intact zero fighter planes, a two-engine “Betty” bomber in the sand, ammunition, machine guns, deck guns, cannon shells, lots of personal items, galley equipment, and so on. It is easy to swim through bridge areas in perfect condition with the binnacles and telegraphs still standing. It would have been easy to use the urinals except they were already full. It is amazing what good shape many wrecks are in after 55 years. The soft coral growths were spectacular but there were also plenty of reef critters and a few sharks and turtles to complete the picture. (**Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail:**

info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Truk Odyssey, February 2000, Harry Cure (cure@onramp.net), Fort Worth, TX. Vis: 5 to 75 Feet. Water: 78-81 to 82 F., calm. One of the nicest live-aboards I have had the pleasure to dive. The dive deck is perfect. The accommodations have separate baths and are large. The maximum number of divers is 16; we were full and there was plenty of room. The lounge has surround sound and big screen TV. The diving in Truk is the best and easiest wreck diving in the world. Best set up for cameras on a live-aboard I have seen! (**800-757-5396, 904-346-3766; Fax 904-346-0664; e-mail info@TrukOdyssey.com; website www.trukodyssey.com)**

Truk Odyssey, April 2000, Claire Ippoliti, Ridgefield, CT. Vis: 55-75 ft. Water: 82-86 degrees. First live aboard my husband and I have done. Everything was great (food, accommodations, diving, guides). I had a slight problem the first day due to jet lag. Stayed at the Blue Lagoon on Moen one night. Clean with good AC (and cable TV only in the second floor rooms) The restaurant was good too but not cheap. The Hanakawa, Nippo, Fujikawa, Hoki all had lots of great artifacts: Bottles, ammo, telephones, torpedoes, boots, helmets. Huge anemones, lots of clown fish, lion fish, bat fish. Dives 70’-120’ on average deeper available for experienced divers. Awesome!