

currents, a good deal of psi can be sucked up fighting the current to the mooring line or back to the stern. Several requests to deploy a granny line went ignored. Since all sites are pinnacles, there is a certain "sameness" as the week progresses in the diversity in dive sites. Not a venue for "big stuff." My routing from U.S. required 23 hours flying, 10 hours connections, 2 overnight layovers.

## PHILIPPINES

***Oceanic Explorer, May 2000, John Crossley, Fresno, CA.*** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 82-83 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. The Philippines can be reached easily on flights from Los Angeles (and can include a free stopover for diving in Hawaii), but probably will require overnighing in Manila before flying on to the live-aboard's port, Puerto Princesa. Manila was dirty, with terrible traffic congestion, and extremely polluted air. The Pan Pacific Hotel in downtown Manila was a great hotel for exploring the city for a couple days; stay near the airport and get in/out of Manila as quick as possible. The *Oceanic Explorer* has 12 cabins of adequate space, a small salon that isn't used much, and a big shaded rear deck where meals were served and most of the non-diving activity took place. Fairly good buffet, with several choices each meal, but desserts and between dive snacks were marginal. Both port and starboard sides have narrow areas for gear storage and suiting up, plus very small camera tables and rinse buckets. Our 18 divers

were divided into three groups, each served by small motorboats to take us to the dive sites. The crew handled all our gear, and dive briefings were comprehensive. We reached the Tubbataha Atolls in the middle of the Sulu Sea after an overnight sailing. The reefs were generally very healthy, with no damage from bleaching or dynamite fishing. Seas were absolutely flat calm, not typical for May. Fish life was pretty good; lots of colorful tropicals, but not many big fish. One dive we had three mantas circle several times, and another dive included a small school of sharks. About every other dive we saw a solitary turtle, shark, or manta. Macro critters were pretty good, especially nudibranchs. Lionfish or two on every dive and Titan triggerfish. Several divers were attacked by the triggers, but only had fins bit. Night dives were good, but we had problems with some type of mini jellyfish that resulted in rashes around exposed areas for half the divers. 17 dives in four dive days on this five night, six day cruise. It was a pretty good value (\$1000)/info@scubaworld.com.phor diveislesaaol.com 877-348-3475 (877-348-3475, 562-865-7198; Fax 562-809-7300)

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

***Aggressor, December 1999, Bob Puschinsky, (puschinsky@aol.com), Seabrook, TX.*** Vis: 75-150 ft. Water: 82-84 degrees. Crew not adequately knowledgeable of Solomons - dove with local dive operator at some of same spots with much better results

because tide/currents. Lots of fish on most dives. One dive with lots of sharks. Good trip but not world class. (**Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628 Fax: 504-384-0817; e-mail: info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com**)

**Bilikiki, 1999, Scott Kramer, Los Angeles, CA.** Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 83-87 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: No decomp. Blessed with two straight weeks of sunshine. The 84-88 degree water was almost glassy most days, and even the open ocean dives were void of strong currents. The reefs and walls are incredibly healthy with huge fans and minimal sand damage. Dives were varied wall wreck, drift, muck, modified cave, lava tube, reef. There were small sharks on most dives, turtles lionfish, and too many nudibranchs to count! The variety of anemone/clownfish was impressive. There were really no rules to follow except try to avoid no decomp. Nite dives were every nite off the back of the boat or from the tinnies. Buddy diving was not enforced. Warm towels after every dive and cookies and fresh fruit bought daily from natives bringing it to the boat on their dugouts. The boat is 125 feet but is set up so well that it seems bigger than it is. With only 10 passengers out of a possible 20, there was plenty of room on the two tinnies used to transport us to the dive sites (often only a minute ride away). When you surfaced from your dive, the wait for pickup was never more than a minute. They would return you to the mother ship, rather than make you

wait for everyone to surface, a nice touch when some divers stayed down 30 minutes longer than others! The inner salon was used for the buffet-style meals, which were eaten outside. There were no mosquitoes, although flies were abundant. The rooms were almost spacious, plenty of storage space, a double below with a single above, and complete bathroom. Hot water was no problem, we even topped off halfway through the trip. All ten cabins are pretty much the same. The food was buffet style, but varied and delicious. We had sashimi from fresh caught yellowtail, tacos, much requested pizza twice, lobster tails on the last nite, and the more mundane standbys burgers and pastas. Every bit of dive prep was carried out by the crew of 10 who were quietly efficient and shyly friendly. William, the manager worked the trip alone and did admirably. He fixed at least three regulators and two flooded cameras and acted as camera pro. They gave special care to Kodak's new VS film. No nite life or after dive activities to speak of. Strict NO JIMMY BUFFETT rule in effect. Two hot showers on dive deck, although no toilets. Three island trips made for wood carvings. **(250-383-7253, 800-663-5363; Fax 250-383-6598; e-mail bilikiki@horizon.bc.ca; website http://bilikiki.com)**

**Bilikiki, 1999, Lionel Specter, Albuquerque, NM.** Vis: 45-80 ft. Water: 82-84 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: None. Suggested 130 ft. max to stay out of deco because of difficulty of evacuation. Flew thru Fiji

on Air Pacific. 7 hour layover on way out, took day room at Mocambo Hotel for shower shave and breakfast \$39 US. Boat was not full so had private cabin. All dives were drift dives from "Tinnies" very efficient, easy back roll off, ladder for re-entry, short waits on pick up very good, water very warm, Scuba Pro 1/2 mm suit perfect. Great for macro, clownfish, pipefish, leaf fish, cuttlefish, etc. Food good. Fresh fruits and some veggies purchased from natives in dugouts. Shore visits good. Bring extra C and D cells for barter better than \$. Crew very friendly and helpful. Native children beautiful, some are blond. Tenth live-aboard trip. Will return, no Nitrox, 3000# and fills very adequate and some wall dives.

***Bilikiki, September 1999, Jan and Terry Johnson (janefryaol.com)***  
**Wheaton, IL.** Vis: 30 to 60 ft. Water: 80 to 82 degrees, calm and flat, occasional current. Dive restrictions: 120 ft. limit was never a problem. Super live-aboard, excellent crew. Visits to villages added a lot to the trip. Islanders make beautiful wood carvings. In one village their panpipe band performed for us, a memorable experience. Diving from small boats, tinnies, was easy.

***Bilikiki, Rainbowed Sea Tours, November 1999, James McCord, N. Ft. Myers, FL.*** Vis: 70-150 ft. Water: 84-86 degrees. The best dive trip I have been on! Scott and Diana were most accommodating. The Newberts were co-hosts and very inspiring and helpful with underwater photo seminars

and camera set-ups and repairs. Saw more critters than I thought existed.

***Bilikiki, January 2000, Barbara and Larry Murphy, Dunwoody, GA.*** Vis: 50-90 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Conditions were partly sunny, seas calm, currents moderate. 2 mm wetsuit, dived own profile with computers. Our 3rd trip on *Bilikiki* in 10 years and what a change. All the large sharks are gone probably due to the fishing rights sold off to the Asians for shark fin soup. Lucky to see a 2' juvenile whereas 10 years ago we were cowering behind coral heads when tigers appeared along with the more common black tips. The remaining site for diving with schooling jacks and swirling barracuda is Mary Island. The WWII wreck diving remains an attraction as does some macro. Particularly enjoyed Velvia Reef with stonefish, mantis shrimp, juvenile scorpions, nudis, eels. Elsewhere in the archipelago are excellent opportunities to photograph condo crabs in encrusting sponges (Male Male Island), elegant and fire gobies. It seems that the big picture in the Solomons has gone from the big to the small. We were witnesses to the brewing troubles that have shut down diving in the Solomons — army roadblocks manned by government soldiers. A trip to "Bloody Ridge" confirmed that many Malatians had been forced to leave their homesteads. Of course, they came back armed. We were not allowed to dive the Japanese beach wreck because it was outside the limits of the local police. Shortly before, a local operator took some

divers to this site and all had to retreat under gunfire. Perhaps the pause in access to the Solomons will help replenish the big stuff if the government is unable to provide security for those countries with fishing licenses. As usual the *Bilikiki* rates top marks for service, comfort, food and attention to the needs of its customers.

***Bilikiki*, January 2000, R.F. Shapiro (rfshugs@earthlink.net), Sacramento, CA.** Vis: 60 to 100 ft. Water: 84-85 degrees, calm and flat, mod. to strong currents. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: none. We have been to the Solomons twice before and despite a well-run boat with excellent service, we won't return because of the remarkable decline in fish life. There were only two exceptions: Mary island with its resident barracudas and jacks and the unusual freckle-faced blenny and Velvia, a dive site in the Russells packed with all kinds of fish activity including fin fanning male damselfish guarding their egg clutches.

***Bilikiki*, February 2000, Steve Ryals, Middleton, ID.** Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 83-86 degrees. Dive restrictions: None. Very good dive operation. Pick you up when you surfaced and take you back to *Bilikiki*. Very accommodating and helpful. Food was plentiful and good. Doors in rooms are slatted (not solid) so you can hear every little noise from every cabin. Extensive fishing has eliminated most of the sharks and big fish. Great variety of small fish. Huge schools of jacks and barracuda. Fantastic for macro photo

opportunity. Great deal. They know the area well.

***Bilikiki*, March 2000, Doris and Bob Schaffer, (seamom@earthlink.net) Fallbrook, CA.** Vis: 60 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 86 degrees. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: none. *Bilikiki* is a top-flight operation. Boat is spacious, cabin comfortable, crew excellent. A cultural experience as well since boat visited several villages in Morovo Lagoon. Weather wasn't great (it was the tail end of the rainy season) but that didn't seem to interfere with the diving. Managers Scott and Diane and the entire crew went out of their way to accommodate the divers. This was our 20th live-aboard and the trip ranks up there in the top 3. Attention to detail, transfers to and from airport, facilitating gear washing and drying at end; was better than any previous operation we've experienced.

***Spirit of the Solomons*, October 1999, Lauren Greider, Encinitas, CA.** Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 83-87 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: No deco requested. Our third trip and still our favorite destination. The water temp at the Marovo Lagoon was 87 degrees. We saw fewer pelagics this trip than others due to water temp but there was a tremendous variety of macro and wide angle subjects including pigmy sea horses and a blue ring octopus. The coral and sea fans were beautiful. Two hammerheads on one dive. The boat is comfortable, the food great, the crew friendly (you never touch your gear), we always felt safe, and Diane and Scott are wonderful managers. The flight

schedules are now easier through Fiji (less than a day of travel). (250-383-7253, 800-663-5363; Fax 250-383-6598; e-mail [bilikiki@horizon.bc.ca](mailto:bilikiki@horizon.bc.ca); website <http://bilikiki.com>)

***Spirit of the Solomons, May 2000, Ted and Maggie Strom, Memphis, TN.*** Water 83-84 degrees, is 30 to 100 feet. Great trip. The boat is well laid out for hot weather, with a large comfortable covered deck used for meals and relaxing in-between dives, and a suitable uncovered deck for sunbathers. The staterooms are comfortable and well air-conditioned, the cheaper bunkrooms tiny but cool. The food was fantastic; there are no comparable restaurants in our town. Enough fresh tropical fruit that you could live on that alone. The boat is run by dive managers Monte and Michelle, an Australian couple who work with a captain and 12 member crew of Solomon Islanders. Monte and Michelle were relatively relaxed as divemasters, not discouraging solo diving and not restricting our profiles. I'd like to think they would have been a bit more restrictive had there been a few reckless or inexperienced divers in our group. Diving is out of two aluminum boats ("tinnies"), manned by some sharp-eyed crew members who never failed to pick us up promptly and handle the boats safely while divers were in the water, day or night, rain or shine. You can do up to 5 dives per day. Most are vertical wall dives, and if you drop something it's gone; the bottom is usually well beyond scuba depth. There is no chamber in the Solomons. However,

we were told that a plane with a mini-chamber (an iron lung, essentially) can reach Honiara from Australia in about the time it would take the boat to get back to Honiara in an emergency.

DAN tells me that they cover evacuations from there to a real chamber in Australia. The Spirit has at least three large (5 feet tall) oxygen tanks; however, Monte and Michelle did not know exactly how many hours of oxygen therapy that would amount to. For our 11-day trip the boat cruised the Russell group, Marovo lagoon, and the Florida group. They also stopped at a tiny island in between (Mary's island). Excellent varieties of corals, sponges, tunicates, and other bottom dwellers. Plenty of schooling barracuda and some massive schools of jacks, frequent small sharks (white-tip, black-tip) and occasional slightly larger, amusingly territorial gray reef sharks. Only a few rays. Several turtles. Some amazing nudibranchs, including a few the size of frisbees. Numerous lionfish. A few spectacular special dives, such as the "Leru cut" (a narrow slot of 40 foot water running a few hundred yards into the jungle), and a way cool dive down a lava cone and out its side at 120 feet. Get extra dives in at Mary's island (under the boat) and at "Baby Cakes" (now known as Velvia) if you can; both are extremely rich in Everything. Monte and Michelle will find you some good pelagic dives if you don't mind strong currents and depths in excess of 100 feet; there are less challenging dives for later in the day, or for those less inclined toward having to kick a bit. Quite a few stinging plants and

animals around, one has to be cautious. A few WWII wrecks, but most are too deep to reach. Quoth Monte: "Try not to bring any live ordnance on board." The crew does a nice job of scaring away crocodiles, which we all appreciated (ok, this only happened once). On our last day we stayed topside and explored a deep, multi chambered cave in the Floridas (at a place called waterpoint). Spectacular, fun, not for the squeamish but well worth the climb (a quarter mile or so up a steep rocky piece of jungle). Tips: Book an extra day in Fiji on the way to the Solomons to minimize the chance of not arriving with your checked bags. A scheduled 8 hour layover did not suffice in this regard (delays shortened it to 2 hr, and our bags did not show up for several days). No major problem; the *Bilikiki* people rented us the gear we needed, then made multiple phone calls to track down our gear and ship it out on a commuter flight to meet us at a smaller island halfway through our trip. Temps on the boat were really not that bad (80's usually), much more comfortable than on shore. Occasional

mosquitoes despite being offshore; we took the usual malaria precautions seriously (high percentage DEET lotion as needed, mefloquine prophylaxis). The political unrest at the time (reports of scattered ethnic clashes outside Honiara) did not affect our trip.

## VANUATU

***Nai'a*, April 2000, Françoise Giacalone and David Da Costa, NYC, NY.** Vis: 30 to 150+. Water: 82 to 85 degrees, calm and flat, choppy, surge, strong currents, no currents. Dive you own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: common sense. This was our second trip on the *Nai'a*. A large transom has been added, significantly easing loading/unloading of the chase boats. Cuisine has improved from already high standards; this ship feels like home. This was the first Vanuatu excursion for the *Nai'a*. 16 or 18 passengers here for a return engagement. Vanuatu diving hit/miss; the President Coolidge is definitely worth a visit. (e-mail [naia@is.com.fj](mailto:naia@is.com.fj); website [www.naia.com.fj](http://www.naia.com.fj))