

and what few boats pass are small, not at all intrusive, and add visual interest. Three to four boats take Tongans to and from work, and others include a few cruising sail boats, a couple of dive boats, a water taxi and a few fishing boats. (Ph: +64-7 862 7456; fax +64-7 862 6668; e-mail dive_adi@wave.co.nz; website <http://www.divenewzealand.com/academy/enquiry.html>)

VANUATU

The world's largest air-accessible wreck, the *President Coolidge*, a 640-foot ocean liner converted into a troop ship, is a each dive on Espiritu Santo. It's mainly for advanced divers, starting at 70 feet and going down to 250. . . . Check with DAN about your evacuation insurance before going; you may not be covered due to the number of divers getting bent on this site. . . . Some diving is available from the capital city of Port-Vila, but it's not spectacular. . . . Little reef diving is offered so far. . . . Water temperatures in February hit the mid 80s and in September may drop as low as 70. . . . Don't miss the side trip to Tanna Island to visit the active volcano, dugongs, and Melanesian villagers living according to ancient customs. . . . Other side trips include the island of Pentecost in April to early June to see the land divers leap head-first from 70-foot towers with nothing but vines tied around their ankles. . . .

LIVE-ABOARDS

AUSTRALIA

Aquarius III, September 2001, David Vickery & Suzanne Leeson, Hoboken, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, calm. We drifted slowly past wide coral canyons with bommies in their midst. The swim throughs, tunnels, overhangs and overall immensity of the reef made me think of diving on Mars. Schools of 4-foot bumphead parrotfish were everywhere and regarded us with curiosity. An 11-foot hammerhead swam slowly by. The diving at Flora Reef in the Coral Sea looked virgin. The group swam away from the reef to surface in blue water for the pickup. The *Aquarius III* is 65' and holds 16 divers (they crammed a 17th into the crew's quarters) and 5 crew members, so with 22 people on board, it's, umm, cozy. We could deal with the crowded dive deck, we could take our meals topside because there wasn't enough room in the salon, and when necessary we could hide in our 'Master Stateroom' cabin, but we could not abide: 1) The bunks (the 'Master Stateroom' had two different sized foam mattresses forced sideways into an odd shaped space, creating bumps and valleys so bad that our shoulders and backs were so sore we thought we were bent) and 2) The food. Breakfast was served after the first dive and was toast and cereal. Period. For some unfathomable reason, lunch (burritos, cold cuts,

macaroni and cheese) was served after the third dive, about 2:30. By that time, we were starving and gobbled up anything offered. So we'd be sitting there with a gut full of undigested food and they would call the fourth dive, and you know what your mother said about swimming after eating. Dinner was pasta with leftover cold cuts in the sauce, or lukewarm lumpy rice with some kind of mystery stew. No desserts. The crew, however, had dishes of ice cream. The diving was pretty good, probably a lot better than Barrier Reef diving, and the Aquarius III is about \$800 for 6 days/5 nights. The crew was great, the Captain was friendly, funny, and super competent. We were there when the terrorist attack at the World Trade Center occurred, and the crew was kind, supportive, and helpful to those who were stunned into tears. No E6. Limited video facilities. One small camera table.

Auriga Bay II, November 2000, Dan Purnell, Vancouver, WA. Vis: 60-120 ft. Water: 78-82 F. Fantastic trip. Only 6 divers and an outstanding crew. The captain knows the Northern Great Barrier Reef like the back of his hand. His selection of dive sites was outstanding. He looked for a variety of sites and worked hard to time dives when conditions were best. Saw dolphins, pilot whales, sharks, cuttlefish, turtles and manta rays. The corals were brilliant and healthy, with a rainbow of reef fish. Some of the wall diving was outstanding, covered with hanging sea fans and soft corals. Did not see another boat for the entire trip. The trip is very much like a

wilderness adventure. (Ph: (61 +7) 4058 1408; fax (61 +7) 4058 1404; website /www.reefcruises.com.au)

Kalinda, October 2000, Shaun and Dawn Conrardy
(conrardy@austarnet.com.au)

APO, AP. Vis: 150+ ft. Water: 75-80 F. Sunny and hot. 2-night live-aboard trip. We were told up front that these trips consisted mostly of divers completing their certifications. The Kalinda was not as nice as described on Pro-Dive's web site (although the web site now describes the boat as "older" and "intimate"). Though it is in good repair, it shows it's age. With 25 people on board (including the crew), it was crowded. Our 'cabin' consisted of one of the four twin-sized bunks in the forward hull. Other bunks were located below deck and on the upper deck. Each bunk had a privacy curtain. Clean linens, blankets, and pillows were provided. Towels were not provided on the boat, and we did not pack any. Fortunately, one of the crew loaned us his spare. The cabins' were all air-conditioned. Since the 'cabins' were just bunks with curtains, storage space was nonexistent. Pack light. The galley/lounge was small and could not accommodate all the divers at once, which made meals a chore. The meals and snack were excellent, though, so the mealtime crowding was tolerable. The dive deck was too small for the number of divers. Half the divers had to put their gear bins on the deck in the narrow confines of the walkway outside the lounge. It never occurred to the dive master to send the divers in waves to avoid crowding. We

three non-students just waited until everyone else was in the water before we geared up. There were 3 very small marine head/shower combos, and we were allowed one shower a day. The crew was gracious enough to be the last to shower every day, leaving all the hot water for the divers. A small plastic container was attached to the wall in each of the heads to keep toilet paper dry during showers; however, everything else got soaked. The crew was knowledgeable, helpful, and friendly. Before every dive, the dive master briefed the divers about the site: depth, time, compass headings, what to look for. She also drew good maps of the dive sites each time. Every briefing included going over safety procedures. There was always at least one crew member on watch when divers were in the water. The cook kept us well-fed with quite an array of delicious foods. Divers had to tend to their own gear before and after dives and we were expected to rinse our dishes after meals (no big deal). Over the 3 days, we had the opportunity for 9 day dives and 2 night dives. Each dive began by gearing up on the crowded dive deck and lining up to enter the water one-by-one. The divemaster logged each person as they entered the water and the time of entry. She also checked air one last time before entry. Pro-Dive has their own permanent mooring sites to minimize damage to the reef. The sites were very good, but not spectacular. The hard corals were amazing, but soft corals and fish life were lacking. We were on our own as far as the dive was concerned. A deco bar hung over

the side of the boat for the mandatory stop at the end of each dive. As soon as we got back on board the dive master marked us off the list and noted our maximum depth and dive time. If we busted the limits set at the pre-dive briefing, we had to sit out the next dive (regardless of what our computers said). Included in the cost of the trip was all the necessary equipment: wetsuit, BC, regs, gauges, mask, fins, etc. The gauges were UWATEC Aladdin Sport computers (practically new) with an attached compass. The BC's and regs were showing their age, but were well-serviced. Dive lights and cyalume light sticks were provided for the night dives. Cameras were available for rent for \$35AUS/dive (included a roll of film). They only had 3 cameras. Nitrox was not available. An added bonus was admission to Reef Teach the night before the trip an educational 1-2 hour presentation about marine life on the Great Barrier Reef. Although there are several dive shops in town, none of them have a very good selection of equipment. Downtown Cairns is a 'touristy' area with many restaurants and shops. Cairns does not have a beach; good beaches can be found 15 minutes north of town and continuing up to Port Douglas (another base of operations for diving the Barrier Reef). (Ph: 61 2 9281 6166; fax 61 2 9281 0660; website www.prodiver.com.au)

Kalinda, 2001, Rickey Wallace, Merced, CA. Pro-Dive had a web page that even showed a boat on a video clip that looked very nice. The "Scuba-Pro" (a very impressive, fast,

roomy dive boat) the used on the 3 day 2 night cruise is, however, the “Kalinda”, a twenty six year old wooden boat 21 meters long. The office staff at Pro-Dive is very helpful, they returned my e-mails promptly and took care of the payment through my credit card, approximately \$250 American. We arranged to have Pro-Dive pick me up at my hotel on the day of departure and they were right on time. I had read in Undercurrent that on prior 3 day 2 night cruises that the boat was filled with Dive-Pro students and few experienced divers. Pro-Dive assured me that this trip was for experienced divers and not students. Out of the 25 divers aboard, 12 were students finishing their open water course, 11 divers had less than 10 dives and only 2 (myself and a single lady from the U.S.) had any significant diving experience. I was assured that the students would be with a separate instructor away from the certified divers and that was true excepting the night dives which were done as a group. When Pro-Dive advertises all meals while on board that does not necessarily include something to drink. We were expected to buy our first bottle of drinking water (for \$2.00 au) but could refill it free. I had brought my own water bottle with me which was fine with the skipper. Fruit juices, cokes, etc. were sold on board. The food was fresh and plentiful although very basic, ie potato soup and cold cuts was a standard type of meal. The type of person that would love this is a backpacker who isn't bothered by the bare bones accommodations. The

rooms are very small with no place for extra clothes or personal effects except for a 2 foot by 7 foot floor next to shared bunks for two. Each person is allowed one 5 minute shower per day as a result of the limited water that can be carried on this boat (Get wet, turn the water off, lather, rise, dry) The crew and skipper are very professional and well trained. The crew knows that they have promised 11 dives and to fit their profile they get you in the water early and often. On one night dive, (you were requested to stay with the group), there was a slight current. The dive master elected took us down current from the boat, upon our return the current had increased and there were swells that made entry onto the boat more difficult, particularly for the less experienced divers. On a day dive, visibility was over 60 feet but not much more, beautiful coral, many fish, turtle and other sea life. Titan triggerfish were nesting and laying eggs; they have three rows of teeth and were aggressive in protecting their nests. The prior week a diver from the boat had been bitten leaving a nasty wound. Next three dives were at this same reef, we did see triggerfish, lion fish, and white tipped sharks. Second dive site was the “Whaler” for the following morning dive (in the water at 7:00 a.m.) Fan coral, lion fish, white tipped shark max depth 70 feet. At “Flynn Reef” my buddy was attacked by a large Titan Triggerfish; she kept her fins in the fish's face while moving away from it. It went after her time and again while she did her best to move away. After her escape we rested on the bottom, she

regained her composure and we started back slowly to the boat. Two other divers had also been attacked. We suggested we move to a different part of the reef but the dive master advised that "Flynn Reef" was one of the nicer reefs and that we should just keep a look out for the nesting triggerfish. V visibility was 100 feet and the reef was very nice in spots with portions that had died. We were able to see clown fish, an octopus under a ledge, a large eel, two large black tip sharks and angle fish when we looked to our left another large triggerfish was going toward my dive buddy; one of her fins was bitten. After she had been duly chased, the triggerfish turned and saw me, (quite a distance away) and came at me. I kept my body turned and fins between me and the fish. After like a long engagement the fish left and I noticed I had gone from 18 to 8 meters. The skipper decided to stay at the same site for one last dive of the day, I refused to dive realizing that I would be constantly looking over my shoulder for another triggerfish. The last day of diving was at the "Tetford Reef". Fog had set in and surface visibility was less than a hundred yards, the current had returned, there were three foot swells, the skipper advised the divers that due to the conditions and his inability to see them if they surfaced away from the boat he was canceling the dive.

Nimrod Explorer, December 2000,
Victor Kenton, Calabasas, CA. Vis: 50-70 ft. Water: 80 F. Dives logged: 1,000+. Holmes Reef is 15 hours by boat from Cairns, yet for such a

remote location, the diving was disappointing. It does not compare to Palau, in terms of shark action, soft corals, and abundance of fish life, both big and small. Except for one dive spot, sharks were few and far between. The captain and crew were consistently helpful and the captain knew the dive locations and what they might offer. On the way back in we stopped for a couple of dives on the Barrier Reef; very boring diving circling a huge coral head (bommie) in 40-60' of water. Australia is a long trip; combine diving with touring around Queensland and it becomes a more worthwhile vacation experience. **(Ph: (800) 322-3577 or US 903-887-8521; fax 903-887-8526; e-mail info@explorerventures.com; website www.explorerventures.com)**

Nimrod Explorer (Formerly Nimrod III), Explorer Ventures Ltd., December 2000, Stone Hansard, Valparaiso, FL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. The 65-ft Catamaran carries a maximum of 18 divers in a combination of staterooms, doubles, and quads. The crew consists of the Captain, engineer, cook, hostess, and 2 divemasters. Our trip was a 7-day (6 dive days) excursion to Holmes Reef in the Coral Sea. The crossing takes about 14 hours and leaves Cairns at about 5pm so the anchor drops around dawn the next morning. There were 5 planned dives per day (including a night dive). Dives were a good mix of reef-wall drift diving and anchored bommie diving. The water was warm (low 80s F), crystal clear (150-ft/45-m),

and calm. The sea-life was fantastic. Besides the usual tropicals (parrots, angels, puffers, lion fish, etc.), whitetip reef sharks, schooling barracudas, schooling trevally, napoleon wrasse, huge grouper, and tuna were common. Large silvertip sharks, greywhalers, eagle rays, moray eels, and sea turtles were seen occasionally. The gorgonians on the reef walls were over 20 feet across. The crew was friendly and helpful. When a back problem prevented my wife from making giant-strides, the crew assisted her in making seated side-roll entries from the stern dive platform. For drift dives, we were taken into position on the dive tender so she could put on her gear after entering the water. The captain was conscientious in choosing dive sites and evaluating dive conditions. A divemaster always checked the current prior to a drift dive and when the Nimrod was anchored, the dive tender was ready to tow tired divers back to the boat. The crew was meticulous in checking divers off and back onto the boat. Max depths and times were recorded and initialed by each diver. Every meal was outstanding... good variety and plenty to eat. Tea, coffee, and soft drinks were available 24 hours, and snacks (like cookies and pastries) were available between meals. Special dietary concerns were accommodated — a yeast free bread called Bush bread prepared for one of the passengers was a hit with everyone. The boat is air-conditioned throughout. The staterooms were comfortable (decent closet and drawer space) and had en suite bathrooms

with hot water showers. The cabins were cleaned and the beds made by the time we surfaced from the first morning dive. The video of this trip was so well done (sea life, diver interviews, candid shots, and background music) that every passenger on board took one home. This boat is not set up for photographers.

Nimrod Explorer, June 2001, Rob Mougey, Highlands Ranch, CO.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy. Billed as a week long Minke Whale excursion. The ship left from Lizard Island, 100 miles north of Cairns. At Ribbon Reef 10 called Lighthouse, a pod of four Minke whales swam in. They approached to less than 3 feet and circled as we did our safety stop. When a pod was spotted, typically after our morning dive, the crew would drift the boat and toss out ropes with floats. We'd don our wetsuits and snorkel gear and jump in, swim to the rope and hang on. The pods ranged from 3 - 20 whales, up to 35 feet long, and many would circle the boat, then slowly approach us in the water. Typically one or two would swim up to us and pass within less than a foot, sometimes rolling sideways to get a better look. My partner discovered that if she sang into her snorkel, more whales would approach her! After "floating" with the whales for 30-60 minutes, we'd move towards the back of the boat and then climb on board. Inevitably, when one of us would leave the water, a whale would follow and watch us climb out. At Cod Hole, a shark feed was conducted and we

saw numerous giant clams. We spent one afternoon searching for a dive site "known only to the captain." We moved in and out of the reef area for nearly 90 minutes, but the area was quite spectacular in rich coral outcroppings and fish life. The dive deck has been expanded and works very well. The rooms are tight with en suite bathrooms, and if there had been a full load of 18 passengers, there would not have been enough space. We had 6, including a researcher. Most of the crew was accommodating. Two guests on board required special diets. There were always plenty of tasty meals, in generous portions and well varied. We missed our flight out of the US due to a hailstorm. We were two days late, arriving the day after the boat left Lizard Island. Our travel agent, Diversions in Cairns, worked with us to charter a flight to Lizard and the Nimrod returned to pick us up. They also gave us the option of taking the trip the following week. The male dive master on the boat was abrasive and immature. The dive briefings were short and quick. A bit more local info would have been appreciated. But, once we were in the water, we were left to do our own thing. The AC in the cabins had two settings, off and freezing. Bring your own soap — none is provided. All the wetsuits are stored on the upper deck, next to the smoking area. To get to Lizard Island, one boards a small 7 seat airplane and flies from Cairns. The return flight is kept below 1000 ft and the view is spectacular. Rinse tanks were not kept separate from mask/snorkel rinse. A makeshift

camera area was setup in the stateroom where several power outlets were available.

Oceania, December 2000, Harley Piltingsrud, (hpiltingsrud@fuse.net) Cincinnati, OH. Restrictions: return with 700 psi. Airlie Beach, Whitsunday Islands. Most of the guests were being certified. The rates for a 4-day trip were \$260 US. The boat was a relatively new twin-hull catamaran. The crew was congenial, and many had fine backgrounds. The Captain seemed experienced and knowledgeable. The dive coordinator, Frank De Bruyne, the course instructors, the divemaster, and the chef, did a fine job. The food was good, but limited. Our trip corresponded with coral spawning, leading to visibility 50 ft. max. Small number of divemasters for the large amount of divers, particularly considering the number of inexperienced divers. Training in the open seas, with unpredictable currents, limited visibility, marine topography, and all other problems with such a complex environment are mitigating factors that should have been considered. During a night dive, with a herd of newly certified divers, we encountered a strong current flowing out to sea. When we surfaced, the run-abouts were back at the boat and it took 10 minutes for them to get to the divers. By that time, we were well on our way out to sea. One runabout threw out tow ropes for everyone to hold onto., but was not able to pull the group against the current. The other run-about caught up and half the group got aboard and were taken back to the boat, while the remaining divers in the water were

slowly making progress against the current. They were then picked up later. Someone could easily have been lost in the dark. Most of the students were in shortie wet suits, and wouldn't have stayed warm for very long in the 77 F water. I sent a letter to the owner of the Oceania, Mr. Keith Payne, citing the lack of staff for the conditions. He agreed with most of my comments, and indicating an intention to correct the problems. I later found out that earlier that day a group of Oceania students on the same reef we had problems on, had been swept out to sea. After an unsuccessful attempt by the Oceania to find them, an air-sea rescue finally found them in time. **(Ph: (07)4946 6032; fax (07)49465859; e-mail info@oceaniadive.com; website www.oceaniadive.com)**

Oceania and Ocean Pro, January 2001, John and Edith Summey, Carbondale, IL. Experience: 501-000 dives. Vis: 10 to 50 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. It seems that the Airlie Beach dive market consists primarily of backpackers with little dive training or experience. Courses that include class work, pool work, and culminate with a 3-day reef trip on a live-aboard for check-out dives. Thus, the common practice is to set dive limits appropriate for these young and/or inexperienced divers. We were specific about what we expected. Keith Payne and the staff of his two shops were gracious in their accommodation of our requests and helped us find a convenient bed and breakfast near their shops, transfer our gear, and adjust our schedule. They provided a

computer for Edie since hers had died on the previous trip. Despite both boats being filled with student groups doing their skills and check out dives, we were allowed to dive our computer profiles and times. The choice of sites was not the best because of their desire to dive in fairly protected areas. There was very lovely coral and a lot of interesting marine life, but visibility was cloudy with run off from the islands. The anchor was used with heartbreaking results. We were told that the state of Queensland would not let them place moorings on the reef. They recognized that a diver's training and experience determines appropriate limits, not regulations. A record of dive times and depths and signatures of divers were a necessary part of the new provisions to avoid leaving divers on the reef. Ocean Pro was formerly a Mike Ball boat. It is air conditioned, but the temperature was more luke-warm than cool. Oceania's cabins can be cooled efficiently. On both boats, the practice in the salon seems to be to leave the door open allowing the air conditioning to escape. Even stores along the street many merchants have their doors wide open. Australians will tell you, "We like fresh air." The food was pretty good, but snacks were not plentiful. No deck towels on these boats. Bring your own. On Oceania, there were smokers on the dive deck and beside the door to the salon, yet there was a sun deck where they could have smoked away from other divers. But, we had fun, especially on Ocean Pro where the crew was very congenial. The participants were taken to a local watering hole after the trip

where they had dinner and a fun evening. (**Oceania: Ph: (07)4946 6032; fax (07)49465859; e-mail info@oceaniadive.com; website www.oceaniadive.com; Ocean Pro Canada: 604-538-5608; website www.oceanprodivers.com**)

Oceania, July 2001, Pat Aderman (pat_aderman@juno.com) Chuo-ku, Kobe, Japan. Vis: 30-40 ft. Water: 72-73 F, calm and flat. Logged dives: 110. Dive restrictions: 18 meter max for 40 minutes. Boat caters to student divers. No provisions for experienced divers. Dive sites were selected for proximity and conditions for doing open water training. No rinse tanks are provided. Crews' attitude is that they don't want to be inconvenienced by divers. Price is relatively cheap. You get what you pay for!

M/V Pacific Star, January 2001, John and Edith Summey, Carbondale, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Pacific Star is operated by Kelly Dive and Sail at Airlie Beach. After paying for our 3-day charter, we cruised out to the reef overnight. The next morning at the briefing, we were shocked to learn that diving would be restricted to PADI open water one training limits: no longer than 45 minutes underwater, no more than 18 meters or 60 feet deep, deepest dive first, use a PADI table (not even the multilevel wheel, and absolutely no computer diving), 750 psi pressure back on the boat. The crew insisted that these restrictions were set according to Queensland law and violations would result in no more

diving. If a diver were out of sight for one hour, by law the captain would be required to call the Coast Guard and launch an air and sea search at the diver's expense. Since, we had just finished three other live-aboard trips in Queensland, two on Mike Ball boats, and the other on Undersea Explorer diving with our computers to whatever depth and time were appropriate, we knew these restrictions were not Queensland law. These people were totally misinformed and we asked to leave the boat and were able to get a ride back to port with another dive boat. The accommodations were cramped but the boat was adequate for the few passengers (only 8) on our trip. Previously the boat took 10 passengers, but Kelly is trying to fit in 20. Water was limited to a single one-minute shower per day. There were no rinse tanks for cameras or gear. Even though we left because the service we contracted was withheld, it was grossly misrepresented, and there were serious questions of safety based on the apparent misunderstanding of regulations and rigid attitude of the crew, Kelly Dive and Sail refused to issue a credit for the balance we had just charged the evening before. American Express gave us a "Good-will" credit for the balance. We thought we had done our homework through reports on the Pacific Star in the Chapbook and information on the Internet. But, apparently our information was based on reports of trips under a previous owner and we had no way to know that the boat had changed hands. The language of the brochures and advertisements implied

“diving freedom.” (Ph: 07 4946 6122; fax 07 4946 4368; e-mail information@kellydive.com.au; website www.kellydive.com.au)

ScubaPro, Pro-Dive Cairns, June 2001, Shaun and Dawn Conrardy (conrardy@austarnet.com.au) APO, AP. Vis: 100 ft. Water: 75-80 F. Cloudy and warm (cool at night), windy at times. Mild current at one site. Diving restrictions: Depth, time. This was our second trip with Pro-Dive, a 3-day/2-night live-aboard trip. New boat(check their web site to find which boat leaves when) and it was heaven compared to the Kalinda. Twin-share cabins were all rooms with doors. Dive deck was very spacious with room for everyone and their gear. The lounge/dining area could accommodate everyone. The crew was knowledgeable and had a great sense of humor. The food was a bland, but it was good and there was plenty of it. Once gear was set up on the dive deck (everyone had a spot for their gear), we didn't have to break it down after every dive to switch tanks. They had their compressor set up with hoses to go around and refill the tanks at each of the stations. The entry/exit point was a water-level platform at the aft of the boat. Nice wide stairs for exits. The weather was grey and windy for a good part of the trip, so the water was choppy at the surface. At least 3 turtles on every dive. Couple of small sharks once or twice. Hard and soft corals were fantastic. The diving was pleasant and easy, great for beginners and those just looking for relaxing diving with lots to see. 11 dives (2

night dives) over the 3 days. Day trips to the reef are run by their sister company Tusa Dive. (Pro Dive Cairns: Ph: 61 2 9281 6166; fax 61 2 9281 0660; website www.prodive.com.au)

Spoilsport, November 2000, D. Demming (Demmingfsc@aol.com) Hudson, OH. Vis: 125-150 Ft. Water: 80- 82 F, calm. definitely catered to slide photographers. (Ph: 800-952-4319 (US) or 61 (0)7 40 315484 (Australia); e-mail mbde@mikeball.com or resv@mikeball.com; website www.mikeball.com)

Spoilsport, January 2001, Elisabeth Sykes & Vick Thomas, Farmington, NM. Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 78-82 F. Dives logged: 225/250. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. depth limit was encouraged. If you drink alcohol, no diving until the next day. Service oriented, fantastic dive briefings by the divemaster Blake. Generally good weather. The S.S. Yongala is a fantastic wreck dive encrusted with corals and surrounded by marine life. Friendly, helpful crew. The first night's crossing was rough.

Spoilsport, January 2001, Louis Weisberg (louiswweisberg@aol.com) Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 50-150 ft. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm and flat/ choppy. Dives logged: 150. Staff superb, especially Blake. Videographer was aggressive and unpleasant. During my private video he shoved me forcefully to shoot me with a turtle. Moorings often in middle of dive site so the boat was never far away. Staff very helpful getting us in and out of water. Scuba

zoo safe and exciting. Very well run. Premium room adequate only way to get private head. Otherwise share with 30 other people. Plenty of food. Other than videographer staff treated us well. Pristine corals.

Spoilsport, February 2001, Buddy Medbery (clinton-medbery@ouhsc.edu) Oklahoma City, OK. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. One of the best dive operations I have experienced. Conditions were difficult because of wind, but crew found sheltered sites and ensured safety of divers. Left to dive own profiles, and diving unlimited essentially. Solo diving if you proved navigational skills. Marine life phenomenal. Most of my previous diving was in Caribbean and Hawaii, and I recorded 126 species of fish I had never seen. More than adequate photo table space. Compressed air for drying cameras. E-6 available and well done. On-board videographer for help and personal videos.

Supersport, June 2000, Karen Guthrie (karenguthrie@home.com) Laguna Beach, CA. Vis: 100-150 ft. Water: 72-75 F. The dives were awesome! Tropical fish like a blizzard. We saw 7 Minke whales while we were in the water. They stayed with us for hours. We were new and one of the people leading dives was impatient with us and that combined with a changing current caused some trouble. The divemaster was great! He took over leading us. We needed to be in better shape or more experienced. (Ph: 800-952-4319 (US) or 61 (0)7 40 315484 (Australia); e-mail

mbde@mikeball.com or resv@mikeball.com; website www.mikeball.com)

Supersport, October 2000, Larry and Joan Eggert, Ogden, UT. Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 78 F. Dives logged: 100+. Good crew, excellent dive operation overall. Boat lacks adequate air conditioning in cabins. Had to ask for top sheet as comforter too hot to use. Lots of schools of fish — almost like being in a fish soup. Dive guides excellent and willing to go whenever asked.

Supersport, October 2000, Jack and Linda Blake, Folsom, CA. Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 79-80 F. Dives logged: 75. Dive restrictions: Computer required. I wish I'd known what to pack and how much space would be available in our rooms. Food was okay — nothing spectacular. Service was spectacular and crew was quite friendly! Wish we had signed up for a longer cruise.

Supersport and Spoilsport, Mike Ball, January 2001, John and Edith Summey, Carbondale, IL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm no currents. Combination booking on two Mike Ball live-aboards. Overnighted in the Righa Colonial Club, a nice upscale resort in Cairns. The Supersport crew welcomed 30 divers with a briefing including safety features and procedures. The three-day trip included 9 dives culminating with Cod Hole. Reef respect was stressed with the Mike Ball slogan, "Peace on the Reef." That is a fine idea until

individual divers take it upon themselves to become self-appointed “reef police” and harass photographers whom they perceive to be too close to something. Not everything on the reef is alive, and a careful diver can find a spot for a finger to stabilize while photographing. The food on Supersport was delicious and plentiful. The crew was upbeat and enthusiastic. The boat is showing age and the room a/cs are not individually controlled. The trip was one way to Lizard Island where we boarded a small plane for a low flight (700 feet) back to Cairns. One diver experienced DCS symptoms and was given oxygen briefly. But, after the flight, her symptoms returned. She went to the local hospital where she was diagnosed with neurological damage. She then had to drive herself to Townsville (6 hours away) to the chamber. After another night at Righa Colonial Club, we boarded a bus for the Tully River and a rafting trip with Roaring Thunder where we charged down the river trying to dodge rocks while our raft guide tried his best to get us thrown out into the water. The river was jammed with rafts. We continued on another bus to Townsville to board the Spoilsport. Despite the crisp, systematic performance of the crew and great dive sites, this boat needs work. Our AC was not sufficient and we had odors from the bathroom. The Nitrox system broke down. Several times food ran out before the last of the big crowd was served. But, it was well prepared and tasty. A special barbie included some silly fun and games like trying to scream “Spoil-

sport” with a mouth full of éclair. No Heimlich maneuver necessary. Highlight dives were on the Yongala Wreck and some of the Flinder’s Reef sites. At Scuba Zoo cages were part of the arrangements for a shark feed. The cages were covered with growth which inhibited a good view. If you were skilled, they let you do your own profile and even dive solo in certain situations. Yet, if you were a beginner, they kept an eye on you. With half the divers, this would be an absolutely great trip, with so many, it was just manageable. Some of the dive sites are quite small and overwhelmed with 30 divers in the water. Spoilsport takes in the best of the available reef sites. Because we booked both trips together, we did not get the free T-shirt which was presented to return divers on the Spoilsport, a bit of a cheap shot since Mike Ball trips are outrageously more expensive than others. Hotel staff was most helpful, food was good, and we were allowed to store luggage while we were out on the boats. Our carry-on baggage which met normal standards for US carriers was confiscated and we were only allowed a sack for 5 kilograms each on our Malaysian Air flight out of Cairns. We had to check our cameras and regulators, things we always carry with us.

Supersport, March 2001, Dave Hall (scubadivindave@aol.com) Lincoln, NE. Vis: 40-100 ft. Water: 82-84 F, calm and flat. Dive restrictions: dive shallower than last dive. Logged dives: 250. Crew was helpful but never got in the way — let us do our

own thing. High tides kept visibility less than expected but brought tons of Fish. Water was warm, just wore lycra skin. The food was excellent! Grueling 19 hour flight to Cairns.

Supersport, July 2001, Paul Sutherland, Princeton, NJ. 97-foot catamaran providing a fast stable ride and a solid diving platform. Four different room rates. Only one grade includes en suite facilities and these may have double or twin beds. The rest share showers and toilets. Standard rooms may have double or twin bed while economy rooms will have twin bunk beds and budget rooms will have bunk beds. Only four rooms on the boat had showers/toilets in their room. Always was hot (scalding if you wanted) water available. Quality and variety of the food was high. Never saw the same meal twice. Meals are served either buffet style at a table at the head of the central salon or served to you around the dinning table down the length of the salon. Wine was included with the dinner. All other beverages were charged to your bar bill. Drinking meant the end of the dive day. Most of the year the vessel alternates between six day minke whale trips (May through September) and their more frequent four day cod hole itinerary (one way) which cruises up through the ribbon reefs to Lizard Island and back. I was on board for both legs, boarding in Cairns and then returning from Lizard with a new group of passengers. Those customers having purchased the one leg cruise have a 700 ft airplane ride to or from Cairns.

The vessel also works an itinerary out into the Coral Sea at the Osprey Reef system. I took a Coral Sea exploratory trip. The weather was against us and the moment we stuck our noses east out past the northern ribbon reefs to attempt to make our way out to the Osprey system our huge stable cat tried to turn in to a submarine, with a massive wave broke over the bows stopping the boat in its path and the guts exploded inside one of the refrigerators Mike Ball the boat turned back inside the reef and spent the next three days diving the rich sites the Ribbon Reefs have to offer. At several pinnacles we saw wobbegong sharks, olive sea snakes, frenzied blue trevally attacking baitfish and the odd turtle. The macro life was dense: pixie's pinnacle had more pipefish per square meter than you could shake a stick at. Ubiquitous nudibranchs and several common species of cowries. We also visited cod hole to rendezvous with the huge potato cod some of which are so friendly that they literally insisted on tucking themselves underneath me as I photographed. The corals are outstanding though having been almost completely wiped out in a cyclone a decade ago. Highlights were the short encounters we had with minke whales. Hanging off the two stern hang lines or the anchor chain one simply waits. Chances are that you will slowly spin in the water just as a whale sails towards your back. Slow gentle movements and patience will pay off as the whales will slowly come closer and closer until they can slip by you at deceptively fast speed just out of reach. With 24 divers on

the second of my two legged the bottleneck was the two ladders. The deck f had plenty of space we just couldn't all get in the water when we wanted. There were also specific instructions about which directions to swim around a bommie (clockwise by the way). Best dive team I seen on any live aboard or land based operation bar none in 20 years of diving around the world. The only glitch came when I wanted to dive solo, but didn't have a pony bottle. There began a twenty-minute discussion about why people need pony bottles. They found a crew member's pony bottle. They also helped me rig the bottle to my primary. The crew was pleased to accommodate. When the salon and rooms adjacent became inexplicably too cold the entire A/C system for that level of the boat was dissected (while we were diving) until the fault was found the system set to the guests liking — all with a smile.

Undersea Explorer, October 2000,
John Gawa (jgawa@aol.com)
Fallbrook, CA. Vis: 70-100 ft. Water: 80-83 F, calm and flat. Dives logged: 130. Dive restrictions: recreational (130 feet).

Undersea Explorer, January 2001,
John and Edith Summey,
Carbondale, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Boarded in a pouring rain. As we made our way eventually into the Coral Sea to Osprey Reef, the weather transformed into clear blue skies and calm seas for a perfect week of diving on some of the most pristine reefs we have

experienced worldwide. We learned a generous amount of information from the nightly presentations by the two marine biologist collecting data for marine research: the subject was the chambered nautilus. Briefings were thorough. The divemasters knew exactly where to find minute creatures like leaf pipe fish which looked just like drifting leaves. We white tip and black tip reef sharks, gray reef sharks, leopard sharks, nurse sharks, and hammerheads, eels, turtles, rays, etc. On North Horn, we watched parades of sharks that made Blue Corner in Palau look deserted. The water clarity, the structural variety, the combination of coral and sea life was astonishing. We were treated like the experienced, properly trained divers that we are and we logged some fantastic dives, even diving to 163 feet where we found gigantic soft coral trees. On Osprey Reef the boat was attached to a mooring and our dives were into the current with returns to the boat. The philosophy was one of support. We were told that if we had any questionable symptoms, oxygen was there for our use. The food was superior and plentiful. A birthday was celebrated with the delicious Pavlova desert famous in Australia, a concoction of meringue and tropical fruit prepared for the ballerina who once performed there. We had an afternoon of snorkeling in the bay of Lizard Island followed by an Aussie "barbie" on the beach. Although this boat was not as spacious as some, its layout was convenient. Heads were on the dive deck. You had to provide your own deck towel. No Nitrox. Not dedicated camera space,

but rinse tank and assistance was available. (Ph: 07 4051 4777 (Intl: 61 7 4051 4777); fax 07 4051 4888 (Intl: 61 7 4051 4888); e-mail reservations@adventures.com.au; website www.adventures.com.au)

Fiji

***MV Princess II*, December 2000, Michael N. Hofman** (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com)
San Francisco, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy no currents. The kitchen and boat staff went out of their way to make us comfortable and enjoy our stay. Dive operations were laid back, especially since there were only four guests. Also owner invited a number of people out for day trips, including several folks completing a research trip. The dive master was terrible. He was young, this was his first trip and he had little idea what it meant to be a good dm. As a result the diving was mediocre. Several times the captain went in on exploratory dives (which I joined) to identify new sites. This was interesting. Accommodations were okay, but not great. The boat is somewhat beamy and several nights we spent rocking more than I care to. Also my wife (who is a snorkeler) had almost no opportunity to get into the water, even though we had specifically inquired into opportunities for snorkeling. Good setup for camera equipment; no Processing. (Ph: (800) 576 7327 or 303-417-0557 (US) or (679) 923 182 (Fiji); fax (303) 417 0557 (US); e-mail

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

***Nai'a*, June 2000, Andrew Kochan, Northridge, CA.** Vis: 30-70 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Logged dives: 85. Should have told us that we were going to visit a village and we could have brought things to give to the villagers (shirts, shoes, pens, paper, toothpaste, etc.). (Ph: 800-903-0272 (US) or (+679)-450-382 (Fiji); fax (+679)-450-566 (Fiji); e-mail explore@naia.com.fj; website www.naia.com.fj)

***Nai'a*, October 2000, Zygmunt Dembek.** Cloudy, overcast skies for the entire 2 weeks under sail, with 20-30 knot winds, 4-6 foot swells, and stirred-up seas in many locations. Two-week charter with Stan Waterman to the remote Lau Island group in Fiji. The Nai'a is among the best of vessels to conduct oceanic explorations, having carried divers throughout Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu, along with special trips to Kiribati to search for the remains of Amelia Earhart's lost plane, and has hosted Howard Hall's IMAX filming (website www.naia.com.fj). Chef Manasa's fabled cuisine kept guests and crew smiling! We dived sites off of Taveuni, Vanau Levu, and Viti Levu rather than press on to the Southern Lau, in part because of the rough weather conditions. Due to political problems, the Nai'a (and everyone else) lost permission to visit Vanau Balavu, but could still visit some other dive sites within the Lau group. We did dive in the Northern Lau, including Motua Levu and Cobia bordering