

minutes from the time he gives clearance to enter the water. Since it takes time for 25 dry suited divers to enter the water via two gates, some divers end up with significantly less bottom time than others. While he claims that this rule is a concession to the notoriously strong currents at some sites, he applies it universally regardless of currents or any other considerations. Another attraction is the opportunity to swim with Pacific white-sided dolphins. On a previous trip with a different live-aboard operation, the captain worked hard to get us that memorable experience by communicating with other vessels that had found dolphins. If Lever made any such effort, it was not evident. No equipment — including photo equipment — that has been taken into salt water during the trip is allowed in any interior area of the boat, even if the equipment has been rinsed and dried. Any deviation from this rule — or any other rule — is potentially subject to stern reprimand. No facility for rinsing gear other than photo equipment (with the exception of an outside shower intended mainly for hair rinsing). This might be due to the fact that the water maker was out of commission, but it was not clear whether the boat normally has a designated gear rinse station. The capacity of the ice maker is inadequate for the number of passengers; we frequently had to do without ice in our beverages. While a trip on the *Nautilus Explorer* does provide memorable diving experiences, I have had much better trips on much lesser vessels with operators more dedicated to their customers.

Nautilus Explorer, October 2001, Clinton Bauder (gecko1@apple.com), Cupertino, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 43 to 48 Fahrenheit, calm currents no currents. Repeat trip. Mike and Mary Ann are great and run a very nice operation. The diving is simply sensational with big wolf eels, giant octopus, huge lingcod, incredible walls, etc. Different but about the same overall adrenaline effect as big animal places like Cocos or Galapagos. There is no substitute for the Giant Pacific Octopus. Way too much fun. Water temp no big deal for drysuit divers. Diving is generally pretty easy if you pay attention to the dive briefings. The food is pretty average and tends too much towards the steak and potatoes. They make you bring your own towel. isn't a big deal unless you missed the fine print before arriving. Big, comfortable boat, nice cabins, excellent skiff for diving, great crew. Can't beat the price either. Nitrox and Argon. Helium is coming soon (and if you're willing to do your own blending could be arranged for right now). Have a look at my website: <http://www.metridium.com> or my dive buddy's website: <http://www.kelpdiver.com> for movies and images from this trip. Taking the Alaska to Vancouver trip next year. Great setup for photographers, Lots of room for gear, chargers etc. E6 processing, light table available. Our trip had an Optiquatics photo seminar with experts on hand for photo tips. 2 big TVs for video.

COLUMBIA Malpelo

Inzan Tiger, April 2001, John M. Andrea, Zurich. Experience: Over

1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 25 Meters. Water: 14 to 22 Celsius, surge currents. Malpelo Island, the least known point in the golden triangle between Galapagos and Cocos, 36 cruising hours from any mainland. Hammerhead sharks and other large pelagic fish such as tuna, wahoo, jacks etc. are everywhere in staggering numbers. Occasional ragged tooth tiger, the Galapagos, and silky sharks and on rare occasions oceanic whitetips and whale sharks. Often this place is called fish-soup! Heinz Buchbinder and his wife run the Inzan Tiger equipped for 6 passengers and 5 crew. The fare of nearly 5,000US\$ per person for the 2 week cruise was extremely high, but from the publicity, we were going to experience a truly luxurious environment. After boarding the ship in Golfito (Costa Rica) we noticed that the boat was shabby and untidy, far from being luxurious and state of the art. Our room had a Jacuzzi and TV with VCR, but nothing was operational. The a/c was not working properly. Captain Heinz did not bother to check certification and dive experience, no explanations on emergency procedures nor safety regulations. He treated both his wife as well as the crew extremely badly. After arriving in Malpelo, the situation got worse. Captain Heinz started to have arguments with the guests about where and how long to dive. One guest was insulted for not acting the way the captain wanted, when one of the rare bait-balls formed not far away from the ship. He did not want to jump into the middle and the captain went through the roof. My wife had an

argument with him, because she did not want to dive too deep the first few days. Later on she felt ready to go deeper and when the captains wife buddied up with her, she was accused of putting his wife into great danger. His wife was neither a divemaster nor anything equivalent. It was just a matter of time until it was your turn to be involved in some insulting out-break. The cruise was meant to be taking 14 days. Instead of leaving port in the evening and cruising 2 nights and one day to Malpelo, we left in the morning, so 2 days and one night was used! Furthermore it should have been the guests decision whether the entire time was going to be spent around Malpelo, or else we wished a detour past Panama and up the coast back to Golfito cutting short the Malpelo diving by about 3 to 4 days. Of course the captain favored the Panama detour, as there would be less diving for us and more relaxing for him; it was the crew doing the cruising anyway. Finally we did stay two days longer, but had to pay additional fees for the National Park. Fees The captain charged us \$66/person/day as a Park fee to dive around Malpelo island. After the trip I got in touch with the Colombian Embassy and they informed us that the park fee is around 3-4 US\$/day/person! On the final leg captain Heinz asked the guests to pass any tips for the crew directly on to him and he was going to hand out the money to his people at the end of the season. We decided to hand out tips to the crew directly when back ashore. Captain Heinz really freaked out and guests were threatened openly. Some

of us were called stingy, other were accused of undermining his authority. We were all happy, when we were able to leave the boat safe and unharmed. Once there was another dive boat (Sea Hunter) in the area and he tried to scare them away by telling them, that we had lost a diver to a shark. This was just one of his macabre jokes he would spread around. After we got home we learned that captain Heinz and his wife barely survived a fire on board the ship. It later on sunk and now lies where nobody can reach it. (Ph: ++505-890-7007 + or Costa Rica ++506-775-1076; fax Costa Rica ++506-775-1078; e-mail SHARKS@RACSA.CO.CR; website www.theinzantiger.com)

COSTA RICA **Cocos Island**

Aggressor, November 2000, R. Moore, Ph.D. (Padidm@earthlink.net) Vista, CA. Vis: 20-100 ft. Water: choppy, strong currents, 81-84 F. Dives logged: 760. Dive restrictions: none. Boat very run-down. Food ok but not great, nitrox fills I felt were unsafe with 40 O₂ bottles standing on the dive deck. Two of us shared a cabin for four so we had lots of room. I have had friendlier crews but they did their jobs. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; fax 985-384-0817; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Sea Hunter, *Undersea Hunter*, June 2000, Lisa Neilsen (wizardcpa@aol.com) Omaha, NE. Vis: good. Water: 75-80 F. Dive restrictions: 100' max depth or Nitrox

limit, 1 hour max bottom time. Every dive with hammerheads galore. Also many, many marble rays and black tip reef sharks. Snorkeled with a manta ray one day and dolphins the next. Divemasters Hugo and Mario top notch and lots of fun. Took the Nitrox course during the 36 hour crossing. Very professionally taught by Mario. Nitrox is a must for Cocos diving. Most divers loved the food. The taste just not to my personal liking. The only dessert seemed to be various combinations of flan. I was dying for chocolate by the end of the 10 day trip. I satisfied my sweet tooth just fine by the continuous supply of packaged cookies the cabin staff kept well supplied. All of the mid morning and afternoon snacks were sandwiches, chips and dip, fresh fruit. Diving is physically demanding and tough. Wimpy divers need not apply. Staff will do small amounts of personal laundry if you ask. Tips are split equally between all crew members and are preferred in cash. This is a first-class operation through and through. The entire team, from first contact with the office staff through the cook's helper, act very professionally at all times. They made this an effortless vacation for me. (Ph: 011-506-289-7334 or 011-506-228-6535; e-mail booking@underseahunter.com; website www.underseahunter.com)

Sea Hunter, January 2001, Jim Beyster, La Jolla, CA. Vis: 50-150 ft. Water: 75-80 F. Dives logged: 798. Dive restrictions: Do not exceed Nitrox MOD. One hour max dive time. I made 20 dives in 3 days. Four