

CANADA

If you can take cold water, the rewards include an incredible array of filter feeders and marine life that you'll never dive with in warm waters. A handful of funky boats and great crews make it possible to get in the water with orcas and other wonders of the cool-water world. . . .

Vancouver Island

Marquira Resort, July 2000, Valarie Batdorf, Gresham, OR. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 52-54 F. Dive restrictions: Be safe. This is the best of N.W. diving. Pretty fish, some soft corals, hundreds of colorful invertebrates. Tashis does get migrating whales that stop by in the spring and fall but we were there in summer. We did encounter schools of dogfish sharks and several six gill sharks, harbor seals and an abundance of other life that rivals anything they have in the tropics.

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for uninhabited Cocos Island, three hundred miles offshore. If you're out for challenging, high-tension, big-animal dives among hammerheads, mantas, occasional whale sharks, and other awe-inspiring creatures of the Pacific deep, Cocos is one of the more reliable places on earth to find them, but it's not for the faint-of-heart, coral lovers, or those out-of-tune with their skills. . . . Follow the weather

pattern when planning trips as the number of sharks is negatively impacted during El Niño years. . . . Visibility and water conditions, however, are unpredictable, with both visibility and wind down in the rainy season (roughly May through November). . . . Northwestern Costa Rica's land-based diving is a smaller-scale version of Cocos Island. There are plenty of sharks (although no massing hammerheads) and a big-ocean feeling with rigorous conditions and an awesome amount of fish life (including good odds of seeing a whale shark) and often poor visibility. . . . Bat Island offshore is the place to go, so insist on it before booking. . . . Beaches vary from not-so-great to decent, but nature side trips are definitely a double "yes". . . . Though Spanish is the national language, English-only speakers can get by. . . .

Bay of Papagayo

Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, Sol Playa Hermosa Resort, February 2001, Pat Wikstrom, Warne, NC. Playa Hermosa (Pretty Beach) is similar to both Playa del Coco and Playa Ocotol to the south and Playa Panama over the mountain to the north. These resort towns are flanked by mountain ridges that enclose their individual curved bays and beaches. Our \$489/person package was based on three buddies sharing a room with a roll away bed. But they couldn't find a roll-way and upgraded us to a two story, two bedroom villa with a full kitchen, two lovely balconies, two

satellite TVs, and a spectacular view of the Bay of Hermosa. The resort is about five years old and consists of a 54 room hotel and 40 separate 1-3 bedroom villas on the hill. The grounds and buildings were attractive and well maintained. Many facilities are components of an adjacent resort called CondoVac. They allowed us to use their restaurant, bar, disco. Little Cushman shuttles transport guests between the beach, restaurant, pools, and the dive shop. Before our trip one of my buddies received an e-mail message from Bill's marketing machine detailing that the humpback whales were again singing in the Gulf of Papagayo, the mantas were being seen daily at the Cat Islands, and that Orcas and Pilot whales were expected to arrive any minute now. The truth was far from the hype. Sadly, the main office needs a new paint job and the adjacent gear storage building is infested with critters. One diver pulled his wetsuit out of the bag and thousands of termites swarmed out of his suit. The two dive boats never failed to start, but thick beads of silicone caulk worked overtime to maintain their window's integrity, the roofs leaked under heavy spray, and they also needed scraping and painting. New wetsuits, BC's, and regs were available for rent. The dive shop has 156 dedicated nitrox tanks. Basically the dive operation had adequate facilities, was well organized. The crew sets up, tears down, rinses, and hangs your gear. Despite the cosmetic deficiencies the dive boats could handle the rough water we encountered. High freeboard and powerful

engines let us plow through stormy seas without too much rock and roll. The 44 ft diesel powered *Giorgiana* is designed to run with as many as 16 divers; we went out with eight. The 32 ft long *Safaris III* ran with as few as four paying customers. Both boats had first aid and DAN O2 kits aboard. The *Giorgiana* had lounging space with folding chairs and a marine head and a small cabin, the *Safaris III* had no head and dry storage in the minimal cuddy cabin. The sole accommodation for photographers was a 30 gallon barrel of soapy water on both boats; masks, cameras, and other gear was indiscriminately tossed in. Entry off the *Safaris III* was via a backward roll, the big boat accommodated a giant stride off the swim platform. Both boats had standard drop down boarding ladders. Our favorite divemaster was Miguel who distinguished himself by his vivacious personality. Ivan and Erick noticed I'd come up from a dive minus the flash unit for my MX-10. After asking where I thought I'd lost it they both suited up, rolled over the side, and reappeared fifteen minutes later with strobe in hand. Lencho, however, blasted across the sites finding little and hardly looking back. One of his buddy groups comprised an under weighted gal whose husband had her locked in a death grip to keep her from floating up to the surface. The husband had painful blisters on his feet so he was diving without his fins. An extremely comical but potentially dangerous situation — Lencho seemed oblivious. Owners Earl and Bobbie Joe Gibbs bought the shop from Bill

Beard and couldn't be more friendly. We dove with Bobbie Joe and her two daughters one day. Earl lined us up with some ex-pat friends who operate a small tour operation and together they can offer sailing tours, jungle trips, offshore fishing, river rafting, canopy tours and other eco-adventures. Affable ex-pat American Mike Flannigan manned the dive shop. The wind had been blowing steadily for three weeks and it kept the bay rolling with two to four foot seas. Those divers who were prone to seasickness were indeed miserable. Our sites were limited to close in spots around the Bay with no afternoon dives; night dives were out of the question. Water varied from 73 to 66 degrees, with both horizontal and vertical thermoclines. Currents at depth were variable with significant surge. Currents on the surface could be serious, ripping my buddy off the boarding ladder just after he had passed up his fins. Visibility ranged from five feet in the warmer pea soup topmost layer to a maximum of 40 ft. Of course the heavy nutrient loading which causes the poor vis is the reason that the marine life is so prolific. Saw more dense schools of fish than almost anywhere else. Green jacks, scissortail damselfish three-banded butterflyfish, spotted rose snapper, Cortez grunts, and spottail grunts. Fine-spotted moray that ranged from dark brown to deep purple. The jewel moray was numerous. Rounding out the list was the tigersnake eel, panamic green moray, and the strikingly beautiful zebra moray. On one site we saw a bloody frogfish then a half a dozen

pairs of Cortez angelfish, the blunthead triggerfish, Mexican hogfish, and bumphead parrotfish, each looking for all the world like someone had raised a knot on their noggin. All the dive sites were either pinnacles or volcanic rock. Hundreds of boxfish, guineafowl puffers, and various porcupine fish. Scorpionfish seemed to be everywhere, hiding out in plain sight. Some sites were just covered in lettuce leaf nudibranchs, others I had giant southern stingrays laying on the sand and mud bottom and eagle rays swooping in out of the green backdrop. Octopus were numerous. The lure of mantas at the Cat Islands and the bull sharks out at the Bats had brought us here, and after five days of diving the inner reefs we felt disappointment that the poor vis and rough sea were going to keep us from seeing the big boys of Costa Rica. Several Undercurrent reviews had mentioned that the rainy season was the best time to dive. We just wouldn't listen. Next time I'll be coming in late June, July, or August. Head out into the jungle for the many worthwhile eco-tourism opportunities if the diving doesn't pan out. For the last few months Vacation Express (www.vacationexpress.com) has been putting together 8 day 7 night budget packages based around a \$199 RT charter air flight from Atlanta to Liberia in the Guanacaste Province. Meals could be had in town for \$6 English is widely spoken. Dive Safaris — www.costaricadiving.net — US reservation office (800) 779-0055 10% discount when paying in cash. After demonstrating our proficiency

we were allowed to dive our computers, go off on our own, for an hour + per dive. (Ph: 877 853-0538; e-mail costarica@diveres.com; website www.billbeards.com)

Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, El Velero Hotel, March 2001, Robert Sweetman (spoonerpuck@earthlink.net)

Monrovia, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 5 to 30 Feet. Water: 60 to 70 F, choppy. Bill Beard's fabulous for land adventures of which we had many. His name is still on the dive operation but that is all. It is run by a couple from Texas, Earl and Bobbi Jo and it is a joke. We requested Cats and Bats but they take you to "where the diving is best for the conditions." Funny how it always turned out to be right off shore. Second dive was about 5 feet vis. Guides generally bored. One came up before any divers. My tank didn't get changed before 2nd dive. Our complaints met with the statement that one needs to expect to get ripped off in "Vacationland." Others left and dove with an operation called Rich Coast Divers in Coco Beach and had a better experience. We opted to cut our loses and head back to the land. Costa Rica is a great place to visit, but leave your reg at home.

Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, the Blue Bay Papagayo, April 2001, Irwin Danto (irwindanto@aol.com) **West Bloomfield, MI.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Water: 67 to 74 F, choppy. Lot's of sea life but hidden by poor visibility. Best dive was to the Catalina Islands where we encountered 30-40' visibility. Most dives were limited to 5-15' visibility.

Thermoclines were 67 degrees. Air temp was in the 80's. Shop, boats, and facilities were in excellent condition. Boat access is from a shore tender near the shop which is at the edge of the beach. Boats ranged from 30 to 40 feet.

Bill Beard's Diving Safaris, Condavoc la Costa, May 2001, Bob Pringle (pringle789@home.com) **Sparks, NV.** Vis: 20-30 ft. Water: 82 F, choppy. Logged dives: over 200. Dive restrictions: time only. Very expensive and well built resort. Timeshare had villas, condos and hotel all built on 30 degree grade. Run minibus every 10 minutes down to beach and back up to lodge, pool and villas. Air service almost non-existent. Had to travel 167 miles from San Jose (4-1/2-6 hours) on 2 lane highway with semis and trucks. Land tours excellent. Cost for travel from San Jose \$140 one way prior to tax. Gray Line Tours run buses all over for \$38 per couple one way. Talked with other divers staying 50 miles south of us. There are other nice resorts with beaches. No live entertainment as advertised, no shade on beach and very little around two pools.

El Ocotal Beach Resort, February 2001, Ernie and Marge Karalis (margek@alls.net) **Algonac, MI.** Water: 67-70 F. Logged dives: 50. Dive restrictions enforced: 100'. The best dive op ever dived with. Never had to touch gear, once you checked in. It was on boats before you even got up in the morning. Pontoon boat loads divers, max 10 per boat and delivers you to dive boat. Capt. and 2

divemasters on each 32' boat. One day 2 boats were booked solid. They took my husband and I out by ourselves instead of making us sit out a day. Vis was bad on all dives. Less than 25'. Wish we had 7 mil dive suits. Not much to see but on one surface interval saw 1000's of cow-nosed rays at Catalina Islands, (a 45 min. boat ride). Donned fins and snorkel and in we went. This was fantastic. We skipped diving on two days to do land tours. Rincon De Laveija was unbelievable. Horseback riding to spa. Then mud bath and sauna at base of volcano. Shower, lunch then hike up mountain to tree top canopy tour. Rigging lets you fly above tree tops from eleven different platforms. Other day went to Tabacon Spring Sand Arenal Volcano. Watch red lava and red rocks spewing at night. Another great tour. Ocotol Resort was beautiful. No children activities. Views awe inspiring. Stay at beach level rooms. Dive shop and pool next door. **(Ph: (506) 670- 0321; fax (506) 670-008; e-mail elocotal@racsa.co.cr; website www.ocotalresort.com)**

El Ocotol Beach Resort, May 2001, Bill Garner, Pittsburgh, PA. Vis: 10-30 ft. Water: 78-82 F, surge, strong currents. Diving restrictions: Depth 80 ft., must have a vest and sturdy gloves, they get shredded in the surge! Logged dives: 359. The resort, bungalows, beauty, service, meals, dive shop, dive boats, dive masters were super great! A trip to Aranal, Tabacon also splendid — rainforests, etc. A side trip to Coral Beach is a lot of fun — a nice beach town. Natives

friendly and helpful. A safe place. One of our group, a divemaster from Los Angeles described it as a study in "power diving." Catalina trip okay, Bat Island takes 2 hours in a fast boat each way — not worth it. Lots of shells but even an empty shell of any kind is taboo. Lots of eels, urchins and, new to me, a Mexican hog fish.

El Ocotol Beach Resort, August 2001, Cristine Romatowski, Bronx, NY. Vis: 3-20 ft. Water: 65-75 F. Dives logged: 170. Dive restrictions: Depth, time, stay with DM and group. Resort is quite beautiful. On steep hill overlooking Pacific and Gulf of Papagayo. Rooms are clean and spacious — T.V. A/C, coffee machine in room. Nice but expensive restaurant with some outdoor seating — great views! Better and cheaper food in town or at Father Rooster's down the hill. Beach is small and not that impressive but resort has 3 of 4 pools at different levels on the hill. Pools need to be cleaned more. Dive shop staff is friendly and professional. They carry all gear on and off boat, wash and hang and repack in mesh bags (provided if you don't bring one). No mistakes in packing gear that we noticed. Good briefings. Dives are for advanced divers — poor vis, especially during "red tide" with currents and strong surge in places. A few people saw bull sharks or cow nose rays but most did not. Where vis permitted, saw octopus, scorpion fish, eels, rays, guitar fish, but these were low in number. Very few schools of fish. Dove in gulf one day and saw dolphins and humpback whales from

boat. Dove Catalina Island and Bat Island. Bat a long rough ride — 2+ hours. Water is cold with definite thermoclines. Layer or wear full 5-7 mm wetsuit if you get cold easily. Can be cold and windy with spray/waves on boats. Ocotol's dive boats are in so-so shape. Crew insists you take all gear off in water before climbing rickety ladder. If they did not drop anchor and engine is running, you inhale diesel fumes while removing gear. DMs are good but a bit high strung and very arbitrary about staying with group. No independent dives allowed. I have slow-to-clear ears and twice they insisted I ascend and go back to boat. If there was an anchor line, they let me descend first and wait for the group. Soda, water, fruit and cookies on boat. No rinse tanks for masks or cameras. They set up your gear between dives; keep an eye on them — double check assembly.

Jinetes De Osa, Costa Rica Adventure Divers, February 2001, Richard R. Gala, Royal Oak, MI. Vis: 60-70 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Drake Bay area, diving Cano Island area. The first dive was at Shipwreck and one of the best that I have done anywhere. 4-6 white-tip sharks at every turn both swimming and lying on the sand. Huge stingrays 4-6 ft across and large schools of grunts and trevallys and 2 large blue trevallys. A return the next day produced almost no fish, fierce currents, water 70-72 and visibility of 20-30 ft. The latter conditions were the norm on most dives. The thermoclines were bone chilling and the currents could be very strong on half a

dive and then could subside on the other half with poor visibility throughout. There were only about 6-8 dive sites around Cano Island and we dove all but one 2 to 3 times. Paradise, was a pinnacle before Cano Island had strong currents. A French couple that dove it said it was their best dive of the week. We never got to see it. The dive masters were not as experienced as some of the people in our group. After one bad dive trying to swim against heavy current due to the poor judgment of the divemaster, most of the group of 11 decided not to dive anymore though we all paid ahead for 5 days of diving. On one dive the hang-over-the-side ladder broke and we had to climb aboard over the outboard motor. The next day they had not fixed it and I decided not to dive. They fixed the ladder the following day. The accommodations were stark. I had the "Standard" room which consisted of 2 beds, 2 hooks and 2 shelves for 2 people. We had to share the head, sink and cold-water shower with 2 other rooms. "Superior" rooms were much larger with bathrooms, hot showers and worth the extra \$15 a day. Everything was open and if someone snored 2 rooms away you had a tough time sleeping. Honey-mooners need not apply! The meals were adequate and tasty and the fresh baked bread was the best. Electricity was turned on only from 6-10 pm and this meant the fan did not work during the day. No air conditioning and it was impossibly hot. One slept in a pool of sweat most evenings and a nap was out of the question. The ice machine broke and we drank warm beer and

pop for a couple of days until ice was trucked in. Corcovado National park is beautiful and hikes into the rainforest by foot or horseback were rewarded with beautiful waterfalls and cool pools to renew the spirit. I went fishing twice and had good catches and the chance to see and feel a very big sailfish tail walk the Pacific ocean. The lodge had just opened a canopy trek on cables from platforms high in trees and this is a must. Unless you get my standard room, I suggest you bring a few nails that you can hammer into the cracks of the boards to hang some of your clothes and, some 100 watt light bulbs if you want to read at night. This is a bare-bones lodge that is trying real hard to improve. The people are very nice, they work very hard and try their best to make you comfortable. There is a lot more to do here than just dive. But it will cost you extra! **(Ph: 800-317-0333 or (506) 371-1598; e-mail crventur@costaricadiving.com; website www.costaricadiving.com)**

Jinetes de Osa, El Ocotol, July 2001, Karen Wakefield (klwake@mindspring.com), Carnation, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, choppy. Great place for under and above water. We saw sharks (too many), stingrays, schools of barracuda, lots of decent size Fish. From the boat we saw many dolphins, whales, one 6' manta and one turtle. Dive master Paul was great — took care of everything and keeps people from touching things underwater. The low visibility makes you wonder what you are missing! Corcovado Reserve

was beautiful — four types of monkeys, snakes, anteaters, wild pigs — lots of birds. Great price — basic accommodations — and really good all homemade food (great bread). We also went to Playas de Coco and stayed at El Ocotol. We dove 5 times, wildlife not as varied — although we did see a frogfish and some big sharks. Divemasters are all over the place, fins hitting everything and one guy used a knife to drag himself along. Watch your belongings! We were robbed twice the first time we were there.

Rich Coast Diving, Playa Del Coco, November 2000, Larry & Janet Gordon (ljgordon@flash.net) Tijeras, NM. Vis: 30-50 Feet. Water: 78-82 F, calm. Carol, at Rich Coast Diving, was absolutely great! We corresponded with her about our diving, our accommodations and even transportation! Her dive operation was prompt and very efficient. We went to Catalina Island and saw white tip sharks, turtles, manta rays, large spotted eagle rays, large sting rays and a large school of small rays. Villa Del Sol, a bed & breakfast was fine but a little off the main road, about 15 minute walk to town. There were a couple of other places closer. Wasn't the best diving we have done but it was a fun trip. **(Ph: 800-4-DIVING or +506-670-0176; e-mail dive@richcoastdiving.com; website www.richcoastdiving.com)**

MEXICO (WESTERN)

Before Cocos Island, the seamounts of the Sea of Cortez were the place for schooling hammerheads and