

opposite. Sometimes the guide was just plain rude. We would wait and wait for the last boat with the guide to arrive at the dive site. Then, we'd all enter the water, go down to the rocks, and that was the last we'd see of Maurice. He did not check on individual divers or point out animals. The captain of the boat did one dive and was a much better guide. The trip captain did not seem responsive to the needs or suggestions of the guests. He took great video but was not personable. My best dives were at Darwin and Cousins. The Reina Silvia worked but was not convenient like other dive boats.

Samba, July 2001, Bruce L. Smith, Kensington, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: >5 to 70 Feet. Water: 63 to 70 F, calm choppy currents. One of 3 boats owned by the Angermeyer family — residents of the Galapagos for several generations — only holds 12 passengers (we were a group of 7). Trip was combination dive-shore excursion trip, so no run north to Darwin and Wolf for the whale sharks and schools of hammerheads. Some really breathtaking diving. Some dives were disappointing — one was aborted because of vis less than 5 feet (due to runoff) — others unbelievable. Not a place for the timid or novice — strong (> 1 knot) currents, many upwellings and downdrafts, surge, cold, etc. First dive on Gordon Rocks was fantastic—hammerhead, several white tips, schools of large eagle rays, huge schools of Creoles and surgeonfish — so large, you couldn't see through them — at least a half dozen turtles, one that was so close it

actually bumped me in the head. Other dives saw spotted snake eels, more turtles, cruising mantas (one large fellow with three remoras in tow), and huge schools of fish everywhere. The crew was outstanding, the accommodations certainly adequate, and the naturalist, Edgar Verges, was very knowledgeable (several of us outdived him in terms of air consumption). Note: the naturalist is freelance, so not necessarily on every trip on this boat. The food was really incredible — fish, lobster, steak, fresh vegetables with every meal, etc. Our final meal included two whole steamed grouper, a filet roast, and two roasted chickens, along with salad, rice and potatoes and vegetables (all fresh)! Lunches always included homemade soups as well as salads and main courses. Overall, a fabulous trip. (Ph: (593-2) 550 952 or 566 010 / 525 727; fax (593-2) 228 519; e-mail andando@ecuadorexplorer.com or andando2@ecnet.ec; website www.ecuadorexplorer.com/andando)

MEXICO

Sea of Cortez

Don Jose, October 2000, Vick Thomas & Elisabeth Sykes, Farmington, NM. Vis: 50-80 ft. Water: 82-85 F. Dives logged: 225/250. Circa 1975 cramped wooden boat with antiquated marine toilets and mediocre air conditioning that runs only at night. Being 6 ft. 3 inches tall, I felt cramped in the bunks and slept poorly. However, the shortcomings of the boat are more than compensated for by the helpful crew and Roberto's delicious meals. Felix and Louis, the

panga drivers (small skiffs), always met us at our ascent at the designated time. Enrique, the assistant chef, ensured that we had plenty to eat. On past trips we've seen whale sharks and hammerhead sharks. This year we saw neither. However, the numerous tropical fish, warm water, sea lion colony at Los Islotes are always a treat. Unique diving at a reasonable cost. No E-6 processing. (Ph: 800-843-6967 or 858-581-3311; fax 858-581-6542; e-mail travel@bajaex.com; website www.bajaex.com)

Socorro Islands

Solmar V, May 2000, Jose Alejandro Alvarez (oac.shipping@codetel.net.do)
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 74-78 F. Dives logged: 700. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. maximum/500 psi. We went to Revillagigedo Islands Crossing from Cabo San Lucas could be boring (25 hours) Some movement but not enough to make you sick. Mantas are interested in divers. I spent 6 hours total bottom time at the Boiler with 4-5 mantas at the same time. We encountered silkys, hammerheads, white tips, silver tips, Galapagos and one close encounter with a 13 foot tiger shark. Saw dolphins once underwater. Huge schools of jacks and tunas, some wahoos and a brief sighting of 2 marlins. Rules are no gloves, don't ride the mantas and no night diving. Crew very helpful and friendly and rooms small but comfortable. (Ph: 800-344-3349 or 310-459-9861; fax 310-454-1686; e-mail CaboResort@aol.com; website www.solmar.com)

Solmar V, October 2000, R. Moore, Ph.D. (Padidm@earthlink.net)
Vista, CA. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: Calm and flat, 81-85 F. Dives logged: 760. Dive restrictions: 130 feet. First-class operation. Fantastic crew, great food. Cabins small with private bath but boat was not full so I had a cabin to myself. Perfect time of year. Sea lion pups were just getting active and put on a nice show at Los Islotes.

Solmar V, November 2000, Bob Puschinsky (puschinsky@aol.com)
Seabrook, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 77 to 81 F, calm. Islas Revillagigedo. Unbelievable diving with manta rays, hammer head sharks, white tip sharks, silky sharks, silver tip sharks, dog tooth tuna, morays, lobster. The manta actually waited for us at the back of the boat and swam to us upon entry to the water. They demanded belly petting. Sometimes it got very confusing because more than manta would approach at the same time and you think there is going to be a big collision, but they always managed to avoid the crash. One of best dive trips in the world. Cabins very small but very nice. Bring only swim suits, t-shirts, minimum of shore wear and dive gear. Terrific food. The crew is exceptional as they are long term employees (10-20 year) and really know their jobs. Did back to back trips with Sea of Cortez and had to stay overnight in Cabo. There are economical hotels downtown (\$50/night) as opposed to fancy beach hotels at \$200/night. You don't have time to enjoy the beach and pools anyway. Trip arranged by Great

Destinations, Sacramento (<http://www.skindiver.com>)

Solmar V, November 2000, Andrew Molnar, West Haven, CT. Vis: 25-75 ft. Water: 76-79 F. Dives logged: 350+. 130 max depth, no deco, no gloves, lights, knives. The Socorro Islands lie 200 plus miles off the southern tip of Baja requiring a 22+ hour crossing. Weather and sea conditions were favorable, so the trip to the islands was relaxing and pleasant. Scott Sundby, a former dive master and manta ray researcher, was on board to re-visit the mantas and to train new divemasters. Most of The briefing consisted of being hammered with the policy of no deco diving, buddy diving requirement and 130 foot depth limit and the repercussions of not following the rules: deco dive and your done for the day! Dive deeper than 130 feet and your done for the day! I found the restrictions excessive, antiquated and arbitrary. Marine park regulations also disallow the use of gloves, dive lights and knives. San Benedicto Island check out dive: We were split into two groups, port and starboard side, which would hold true for the trip. Most diving is off the pangas, except when diving with the mantas at the "Boiler", a seamount that comes to within 40 or so feet of the surface, then one dives off the back off the Solmar V and swims about 150-200 yards to the site. In the "Canyon" at San Benedicto the vis again was no more than 30 feet, cold thermoclines, and strong current. No hammerheads. Hardly saw anything at all. At the "Boiler" the

mantas arrived on cue, first one, then another, average wingspan of 14-18 feet. They like their lower belly scratched and will hover over you while you interact. Sometimes you don't notice that while you are touching them, they are taking you into a 360 degree loop. The pattern for all was similar; morning dive at the "Canyon" then three to four dives with the mantas. The number of days at this site was partially due to the inability to make the crossing to "Roca Partida", due to ocean conditions. We did encounter a few mantas and a couple of smaller schools of hammerheads at Socorro. The mantas at Socorro were not as interested in interacting. I could have stayed with the mantas at the "Boiler" for the entire trip, but the captain did successfully attempt another crossing to "Roca Partida". Our last diving day was spent at this site. Sharks, sharks and more sharks. Schools of 30 and more hammerheads on all three dives, with encounters as close as 5-6 feet. Also had white tips, silkies and the mysterious Socorro sharks. These sharks look like a cross between a bull shark and the Galapagos sharks. These were about 6-8 feet, but their girth was huge. Strong currents, colder water, larger fish and many apex predators made this an electric ending to the dive trip. The ship itself is well appointed, clean and well maintained. Meals were generous and well prepared. The chef works wonders. The crew was friendly, eager to help and fun to be around. The dive masters, Axel and Luis, were enthusiastic and made the restriction imposed

diving fun. Luis, my dive master, is a shark fanatic and we had some great times with the numerous encounters, particularly at "Roca Partida".

Cramped cabins. Not much difference in the standard cabin or the deluxe cabin, which we had, except the price. I dove with mantas before, in Fiji, Yap, and New Guinea, but those encounters will never compare to the frequency, number and almost spiritual nature of these encounters at Socorro.

Solmar V, December 2000, R. Moore, Ph.D. (Padidm@earthlink.net) Vista, CA. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: Calm and flat, 81-85 F. Dives logged: 760. Dive restrictions: 130 feet. Did 20 dives; 16 were with 4-6 large mantas. They would stay around all day. Second time in 3 months on this boat. They are fantastic crew. You ask for it and they do it from captain to deck hands.

Solmar V, Amigos Del Mar, March 2001, Mary Brownell (cockatoo@aliens.com) Traverse City, MI. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 70-72 F. Dives logged: 150. Dive restrictions: 130 feet. Not only was the diving phenomenal, but the staff, food and service were outstanding as well. Every single individual on board ship went beyond the call of duty to assure that our every need was met. We enjoyed diving with numerous sharks, turtles, lobsters, octopi, dolphins and, of course, the beautiful, friendly mantas. A few of us even had the amazing (albeit brief!) experience of swimming with a mother humpback whale and her calf! Chef Pedro outdid himself with excellent meals and snacks.

Solmar V, May 2001, Fred Turoff (fturoff@astro.temple.edu) Philadelphia, PA. Water: 69-74 F, choppy. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. depth limit. 4-5 meter mantas solicited contact with divers (too much petting and your fingers bleed!) Sharks sometimes curious — we aborted going to the bottom once to stay with 3 sharks (2 silky, 1 dusky) under dive boat and they ended up approaching us within reach. Humpback whale song entertained us during dives but they stayed away from boat. Occasionally entertaining us with breaching (one diver did see a 40 ft. individual underwater). I can't remember better food on a boat (and more than I could eat). Water colder than expected, hood and layers needed by thin folks. Mostly volcanic rock bottom with sparse coral but plenty of fish and lobster. Lots of stuff in water at times, which hurt photography. No E-6 processing.

Solmar V, July 2001, Ed Heimiller (heimiller@att.net) Streamwood, IL. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 72-82 F. Dives logged: 4,000 +. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. Trip on short notice, one and half weeks. We were scheduled to arrive in Cabo at 1:00 pm and board the boat by 4:00 pm for departure. This was a mistake; our flight from Dallas to Cabo was late and nowhere in the literature did it mention that it is was a 45 minute cab ride (\$75) or hour and half share a cab ride (\$12) to the marina. They suggested the share-a-ride, and so we arrived at the boat at 4:30 pm. The captain was holding the boat until 5:00

pm. Another diver had to be pick up at La Paz the next day. We were given our room assignments (201 and 203) and diving stations (6 and 13). These rooms have only 8 by 2 ft of deck space. To your right is a small storage area with three small drawers and a small half closet. Directly in front of you are the bunk beds with a small porthole. To your left is the all in one bathroom/shower, you sit on the toilet to use the wash basin or take a shower. Room 202 is large but it is directly in the bow and butts up to the chain locker. Meals at 7:00 am, Noon and 7:00 pm in dining area. All drinks except hard liquor was free. Two types of diving, open — from the stern when you and your buddy wanted or panga — diving from the zodiacs. The crew asks that you remove your regulators after each dive so that they knew to fill it. All lunches and dinners were three course meals. We dove Isla' Cerraluo, Isla Partida, Isla Animas, Isla San Diego, El Bajo and La Renya which are underwater mounds some of which break the surface. There is very little coral, mainly boulders. At all locations green morays were present. The guitarfish was plentiful — it looks like a ray. Schools of fish of a wide variety. Saw a large parrotfish with a hook and line in its mouth. Several turtles were seen, one with a hook in its mouth. Snorkeled with 100 dolphins one day in between dives. At La Renya a manta ray appeared out of the hazy where we were and slowly swam past us stopping several times before it departed. We ended our diving on Friday night because our flight was at

7:30 am Sunday morning, but other divers were able to dive once, twice or three times on Saturday. We arrived back in port about 8:00 pm so you could go out and see the town but you had to be off the boat by 8:30 am Sunday morning.

Solmar V, August 2001, Sue Fanfarillo, Locust Grove, VA. Vis: 10-80 ft. Water: 72-84 F. Dives logged: 365. Return trip. Boat is still well maintained, the food very good but the dive operation was seriously lacking. Seems the boat had a set itinerary and when dive conditions were poor at one site, there were no contingency plans to locate a better site. First day at seamounts nearly everyone surfaced shortly after beginning the dive because of strong current, 10' "visibility", 120'+ depth and lots of jellyfish. No one saw anything worth the effort. Divemasters Ray and Axel saw no reason to leave the site and wanted us to spend the rest of the day there! They said they thought the dive was a good one. It took a few of us to convince them otherwise then we motored back three hours to a site we had already made four dives on two days earlier. Other live-aboards I have been on have had alternate dive areas when conditions are not ideal but the Solmar does not. We were only moving to new dive locations once a day. The dive sites on this trip were not large enough to warrant more than two dives each. On one dive, Ray took us over a vast expanse of sand until he lost all of us in the low vis. The pangs driver, Geronimo picked us up and took us to

the right place while Ray continued his dive alone, oblivious that his entire group was no longer with him.

Geronimo, was tops. The other driver, Luis, was terrible. He was dropping and stepping on equipment and didn't seem to care.

PANAMA

MV Coral Star, January 2001, Terry Anderson. Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 84 F. Flew to Panama City, met at airport and taken to nice hotel in the safe, financial and restaurant district of the city. Rented a car for \$40 and saw the entire canal in a day. Flew to David in the north, and taken to the boat. One week is between \$1600-1800, depending on the cabins. The Coral Star is an excellent 110 foot live-aboard, fully air conditioned, with large cabins and spacious living room and bar. Captain Ted and his crew were friendly and helpful. Two dive masters. Excellent, fresh food, as much as you can eat. After morning dive, hot towels and cookies. Only 6 divers on a boat that could hold 16, which would be too crowded. Coif Island, Pacific side, is rather like that side off Costa Rica. Many white tips, turtles, a million eels (some free swimming). One day we saw 7 small mantas, or mature devil rays (5 foot), and they zoomed into us; another day we saw 5. Lots of fun on night dives, the forth dive of the day. Superb service, nice folks. (Ph: (800) 733-4742 or (307) 733-3127; fax (504) 871-7150; e-mail sherri@coralstar.com; website www.coralstar.com)

UNITED STATES

Southern California

Horizon, August 2000, Gordon Robinson, Larkspur, CA. Vis: 20-60 Ft. Water: 60-68 F, calm and flat. Logged dives: 2,000. A great boat for a serious diver with a specific purpose. I was on the trip reported in latest issue of Undercurrent. I was doing photography and the crew tried hard to take care of me as well as the hunters. Photo set up a little more cramped that the article indicated, but okay. Real issue is parking at harbor. I was alone so needed to carry my stuff without help. Had to wait two hours for parking space. I would pay a lot not to have that hassle. (Ph: (858) 277-7823; e-mail diveSD@horizoncharters.com; website www.horizoncharters.com)

Peace, October 2000, Jeff McGrath (jamc2dive@aol.com) Fremont, CA. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 60-70 F. Logged dives: 800 +. (Ph: 805-984-2025; fax 805-382-6178)

Peace, May 2001, Tim & Paula Pastushin, Mission Viejo, CA. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 48-52 F, calm and flat. Logged dives: 450. Excellent dive boat — 2 day trip to dive pinnacles around San Miguel Island. Excellent deep diving on Richardson's & Wilson's Rock, Boomerang Bank. Lots of current and surge — not for inexperienced. Fished between dives for rockfish and lingcod. Hot tub gratifying for cold hands after dives. Seven dives offered first day. 3 on the second. Food outstanding. BYOB. Very solo and/or game tolerant. Bow gate great for high current giant