

unexplored territory. . . . Diving is year-round with plenty of places to dive in the lee, but April and May are the best months, followed by October, November, and December. . . . The Solomons are a possible add-on from Fiji (1300 miles to the southeast) or Papua New Guinea (700 miles to the west); Honiara is on the main island of Guadalcanal; use it only for overnighting. . . . Solomon Islanders produce fine wood carvings. . . . This is serious malaria country. . . .

TONGA

This island grouping, with all the beauty of the classic south Pacific, lies 600 miles to the southeast of Fiji and can be reached via Hawaii, Fiji, or New Zealand. There are few dive operations here, but diving is good and may get better if other resorts open.

Dolphin Pacific Dives, Tongan Beach Resort, September 2001, David Dornbusch Oakland, CA. In the Vava'u island group, Aroha and Joseppe operate Dolphin Pacific Divers. They are very knowledgeable, charming, and accommodating and provide excellent gear, including computers. I and my wife and two other couples chartered a Moorings sailboat for a week and then stayed five nights at the Tongan Beach Resort. Dolphin Pacific met us at a number of anchorages, as well as at the resort dock, from which they took us to some excellent dive sites. A few

of the shallow corals were damaged and bleached. However, most of the shallow sites were in excellent condition, and below 15 feet the reefs were in very good condition. Numerous tunnels, caves, chimneys, and walls. The corals and fish life are beautiful and varied, though not as abundant as the best South Pacific destinations. No pelagics The outside reefs are rarely accessible. Humpback whales come to Tonga to breed and calf. The calves are especially playful, often breaching and coming up to look us over. Whenever Aroha and Joseppe spotted whales, they altered course and spent quite a bit of time maneuvering the boat to safely bring us as close as possible and put us in position to snorkel with them — which we did twice. Aroha was very patient, working one-on-one with one of our group who had not yet completed her open water certification dives. Two tanks, without gear, cost US\$40. Fine night dive where we saw two Spanish dancers. Tongan Beach Resort — Natalie and Damien are superb managers, eager to please. The resort is comfortable, clean, well maintained, beautifully situated, and serviced by very pleasant and willing staff. It has only 15 rooms/cottages. The food is excellent and abundant. We stayed at one of the two cottages over the water which was especially enjoyable, with a couple of lion fish, a stone fish, and a variety of crabs, reef fish just down our private stairs. Whales cruised by and breached one morning. The resort is isolated and low key. Although it is located on the “main channel,” the channel is very wide, population low,

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,