

and come back up. Poor navigators may have to do green-water ascent — try to avoid this! Currents can be strong in top 20', generally minimal to moderate at depth. Bob and Kelley (owners + instructors of Anacortes D & S) monitor and rearrange teams for best experience and safety, stepping into buddy a less-experienced diver, and provide help generally (including optional argon pony bottle and fills if previously arranged) — plus enthusiasm and extensive knowledge of the ecosystem. No Nitrox. No film processing, however at least half the photographers were digital. Camera rinse tank on board. Octopus and wolf-eels on most dives, often out in the open — these guys were big but receptive to respectful fondling. Abundant nudibranchs, anemones, seastars, abs, sponges, brittle stars, giant rock scallops, rockfish, greenling, huge lingcod, ratfish, baitballs. Saw a humpback whale, seals, sea lions from the boat + lots of eagles. The viz, diversity, abundance and size of marine life are superior to Puget Sound diving and the ambiance of Rendezvous Lodge makes this a memorable expedition.

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 affected 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. . . .

El Ocotal, Hotel Ocotal, September 2001, Carl Scott, Spring, TX.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 68 to 82 F, surge. Large schools of many species, along with unusual critters not found in the Caribbean. Sharks every day (white tips, and bull sharks at Bat Islands), saw several schools of bat-nosed rays and countless schools of other species. The stingrays were plentiful and huge. Schools of playful spotted dolphins, mating turtles (for the voyeurs aboard)

and several humpback whales (a mother and calf close up), all of which the boat captain was willing to seek for us. Hotel and dive service was impeccable. They took care of your gear from arrival to departure. Even the rental gear was in better condition than I've seen anywhere. There was surge everywhere, though usually not so bad as to impede normal diving (made macro photography a challenge. Thermocurrents on every dive, altering the typical 82 F water temp by at least 10 F (I'm sure some currents were in the 60s, though I recorded only low 70s). Nonetheless, a full polar fleece, with a 3mm neoprene vest, was adequate. Food at resort was worth sticking with, sometimes worth raving about. Town (2 miles or a \$5 cab ride), but ask where the locals (Ticos) eat. Great food for \$3-5 per meal. The locals are charming, as well, and, as much as they want your dollars, seem relatively trustworthy (another guest left an expensive camera at an outdoor restaurant table in town, and it was there, under the staff's protection, when they returned half an hour later). \$180 (round trip) for a private taxi (vs \$10 for the public bus, I think), to get there. They'll stop anywhere you want along the way, and do everything on your schedule. Besides, it saves about two hours each way (four hours from San Jose, instead of the six by public bus). If you take the public bus, you'll need to pay for a hotel the night of your arrival, because it only runs in the early morning. This resort stretches from the black sand beach to the top of a high hill. The view at the top is

gorgeous, but the walk up is hell (they'll give you a ride, if you ask. I stayed at the bottom and was happy to be near the dive shop, beach, and daytime bar/snack bar. The restaurant is at the top of the hill and provided my daily dose of the great view. Divemasters were always mindful of UWP's considerations. (Ph: 506-670-0321; e-mail elocotal@racsac.co.cr; website www.ocotalresort.com)

El Ocotal, December 2001, Mark Noble (mnleafycdragon@aol.com), Ocala, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 72 to 75 F, calm surge currents. The local dives are so-so. The best diving is on the outer islands that costs extra to go to but is worth it. Catalina Island was awesome, lots of fish. I would only dive the out islands and skip the local dive.

Rich Coast Diving, February 2002, Cynthia Smith, Madison, WI. Vis: 3-10 ft. Water: 72-74 F. Dives accrued: 300+. \$80 for a two tank dive at a distant island to see mantas and sharks. The dive boat was not working so they showed up with a deep sea fishing boat. We rented for that day and were assured computers were available as standard equipment for their diving set ups. At the time of diving all the gear of the five people renting leaked badly, my husband's was so bad we decided not to dive. The divemaster in poor English proceeds to argue with him to get him to dive anyway. To stop the rapid leak from the power inflator the divemaster just disconnects it before my husband inflating his B.C. So I swim up to a

scene of a small Costa Rican climbing on top of my husband, they were both yelling at each other. The current was spinning and tossing them both. The divemaster was trying to reconnect the power inflator while my husband is swimming to stay up. Meanwhile the boat Captain had moved off 100 yards and had to be called back. When he arrived, we found that they had no dive ladder and we all had to climb and be lifted over the gunnel to get into the boat. Visibility at its best was 10 feet down to 3 feet. We followed the divemaster who constantly lost us when someone stopped to look at anything. I saw several eels, two nudibranchs and a bull shark — none of which did the divemaster see.

Another diver badly cut the bottom of her foot climbing into the boat. We were directed to put our feet into the cold water ports to get into the boat. They pulled us up into the boat by our arms to get us in. Her foot slipped when they were not ready and dropped her into the propeller. We did not get a refund for my husband's dive/rental fee. The dive operators called any stingray a manta, as we saw several bat rays at the surface from the boat and they called them mantas to hype us up before the dive. (Ph: 800-4-DIVING or +506-670-0176; e-mail dive@richcoastdiving.com; website www.richcoastdiving.com)

MEXICO

Before Cocos Island, the sea-mounts of the Sea of Cortez were the place for schooling hammerheads and sea lions. The sea lions

are still there, although the hammerheads are harder to predict. . . . Some live-aboards now run to Isla Socorro to find hammerheads, although it's a long ride and there's no guarantee of sharks or good weather. . . . Manta rays are more reliable, and they have a reputation for letting divers approach them. . . . In winter and spring there's a thermocline, with 70 to 80 degree water on the surface and 50 to 60 degree water below 30-40 feet. . . . Visibility is determined by the plankton blooms; while it's low (25-40 feet) in midsummer, it generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer. . . . From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult. . . . Wear a wetsuit for protection from jellyfish even if the water's warm. . . . Whale-watching season is from December through March. . . . The nice hotels and restaurants from Cabo to the North have helped make it a long-week-end retreat for some California divers. . . .

Sea of Cortez

Baja Sur

Baja, August 2002, David Kulka, Burbank, CA. My wife and I took a 3-week driving and diving trip through Baja California and Northwest Mexico, diving with five operators during the trip. We brought all our own gear, including full tanks. I enjoyed diving there with my beloved 95 cubic feet steel tanks and realized