

Darwin and could stay extra at best spots. We stayed extra day at Darwin. Schools of hammerheads all over, with dolphins everywhere. Saw several whale sharks. Morays and turtles too numerous to count. School of fish so thick it blocked the sun. Land excursions were great also. Crew support was outstanding. Food was very good, considering small kitchen and 10 day trip. Boat only a year old and in good shape.

***Sky Dancer, July 2002, Mary Anne Pedoto, Cincinnati, OH.*** Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 66-69 F. Dives accrued: 900+. July is evidently not a good time for Galapagos. Poor vis: Sharks timid, no whale sharks. Boat (for being 1.5 years old) is not aging well! Mold and mildew in heads. Crew was great. Food very disappointing.

## MEXICO

***Solmar V, Amigos Del Mar, 2001, Mel Butler (mbutler621@aol.com) Claremont, CA.*** Vis: 20-30 ft. Water: 72-75 F. Dives logged: 860+. Dive restrictions enforced: 130', no decompression dives. A clean, efficient, friendly live-aboard that travels 230 miles south of Baja California (25 hrs. down, 28 back). Sea was very rough during our week (6-8' seas @ Roca Partida and "Boiler") but divemasters and crew were excellent getting us in and out of zodiacs. Water was quite murky. Did not see many hammerheads, but mantas usually found us near the end of each dive. Rooms very small, especially the shower/toilets. Good 110 power outlets above beds. Water is cool: 72-75 F on surface, but

67-70 F at depths. Fellow passengers were fun and crew outstanding. A good trip. (Ph: 800-344-3349 or 310-459-9861; e-mail CaboResort@aol.com; website [www.solmar.com](http://www.solmar.com))

***Solmar V, November 2001, Mr. & Mrs. H. Kimberger, Austria, Europe.*** Vis: very good. Water: 23C. Dives logged: Hellmuth 1520, Ginette 656. Dive restrictions enforced: 40 m. A nice boat, well kept and clean, but cabins are small with little storage space. The dive operation is well organized and is being run efficiently by a competent and friendly staff. The information provided before leaving home was detailed and precise. The trip was the best in our 25 years of diving. Encountered four different schools of sharks; dove with up to eleven huge mantas on one dive; encountered several schools of dolphins and on once 15 interacted with us for the length of the dive. We dove for two continuous days with two whale sharks at Isla Partida — a dream come true for any diver!

***Solmar V, November 2001, Harry A. Kreigh, Sacramento, CA.*** Eight-day trip (5-1/2 days of diving) starting and ending in Cabo San Lucas (24-hour crossing each way) with diving in the Revillagigedo Islands. 16 passengers with a capacity of 22. Mostly sunny (80-85 F) with variable light winds, some large ocean waves (6-8') at San Benedicto created considerable surge; surface water temperature 78-80 F and visibility was 20-75' except at Roca Partida where it was 125-150'. Currents were highly variable and changed rapidly. Stable boat with

comfortable ride and usual level of engine noise; elegantly appointed furnishings with mahogany, brass rails and etched glass; spacious salon/dining room with four large tables for meals and four intimate bar tables; modest book/video library, CD, VCR and table games. There are six double cabins at midship (superior) and five double cabins in the bow (standard), all on the lower deck; all cabins are small for two people, barely enough room for both to stand at the same time, one large bunk on the bottom and a very narrow top bunk with not enough clearance to sit on the top bunk, limited storage space individual reading lights (the light for the top bunk is too low, annoyingly close to your head while sleeping and can't be repositioned), ensuite bathroom with hand-held shower (plenty of hot water), air-conditioning unit with no thermostat, VCR for private video viewing and porthole for natural light. Outstanding service from six crew members; daily maid service and linens are changed once. There is sufficient space and furniture for relaxing in the sun on the top deck (but considerable noise from the compressors). Complimentary fountain soft drinks, iced tea (provided at our request), beer and wine at self-serve bar; coffee and hot water available 24 hours a day. They served meals in the dining room; a pre-breakfast (coffee, juice, and cereal) at 6:00 A.M. was followed by a cooked breakfast (eggs, pancakes, or French toast with tortillas or toast) at 7 A.M.. Lunch was served after the second dive with delicious soups and

various Mexican dishes (chili relleno, chicken mole, etc.). Varied, abundant and tasty dinners around 6:30 P.M. with salads, vegetables, potatoes/rice and chicken/steak/pork/shrimp/pasta, fish, vegetarian (upon request) entrees. Crew/passengers caught yellowfin tuna during our trip, and the chef prepared sashimi for us; fresh fruit available throughout the day; desserts consisted of cake, pie, flan or ice cream; afternoon snacks included shrimp cocktail, buffalo wings, popcorn, chips, cookies, and peanuts. Dives were 8:00, 10:30, and 2:00 daily. At "The Boiler," there was open diving throughout the day. They filled tanks in numbered stations along each side of the large dive deck, and personal gear was stored in bins under the bench at each station. They filled tanks to 3000 psi. There were two racks with hangars for wetsuits and diveskins on the dive deck. Plenty of space on the dive deck to gear up for a dive. We made half the dives directly from the dive platform or side gate; the double ladder is sturdy for easy exits. The other dives were from inflatable pangas with tank racks (they filled tanks in the pangas). A panga was always available for pickups and the driver was usually prompt in reaching divers. There were four large camera/equipment rinse buckets, two fresh water showers on the dive deck, and each diver was given a fresh towel each day (not really frequent enough). Hang lines with regulators were dropped from both sides of the stern for safety stops. There is a large camera table with several storage shelves in the center of the dive deck

with multiple outlets for recharging batteries. Divemasters, Axel (Belgian) and Rey, are contracted from Amigos del Mar and have both been on the *Solmar V* for 2-3 years. One or both were in the water on most dives and pointed out marine animals to divers. Dive briefings were basic, but usually accurate. We dove volcanic rock formations (covered with barnacles and some gorgonians), submerged pinnacles/walls and a canyon. Night dives are not permitted, neither are gloves, knives nor dive lights (except those on cameras); manta riding is strictly prohibited; these rules were established by the Mexican government to protect the marine sanctuary. A maximum depth of 130' was enforced and no decompression diving was allowed. No drinking and diving. Violations resulted in suspended diving privileges (terminated if caught riding a manta). Solo diving was permitted. On the first evening, as we watched from the railing, they chummed the water with fish blood to attract the sharks and then they dangled tuna carcasses above the surface, while approximately 7-8 Galapagos and silky sharks snapped at the food and battled each other for position. On our last day of the trip, the conditions at "The Boiler" were outstanding (calm with 70' visibility) so we could anchor close to the divesite and had extended interactions with 2-6 mantas (large chevron mantas with wingspans up to 18' and smaller black mantas approximately 12' across) throughout the day. There were also Galapagos and whitetip sharks present. The mantas hovered

above divers to be stroked on the belly and claspers. They seemed to enjoy the physical contact and returned repeatedly to play with the divers and other mantas. I encountered my first tiger shark. It wasn't large (maybe 10' long), but the stripes and blunt head were unmistakable. It was hanging motionless in shallow water (40') and I observed it for several seconds before it even moved. Then it turned its head toward me, looked back straight ahead and slowly and deliberately dove straight down into the depths. Roca Partida action was continuous. Small groups of silks, Galapagos, silvertips, whitetips and a few hammerheads paraded by while we were surrounded by large schools of jacks, Creoles, triggers and skip-jack/yellowfin tuna and an occasional wahoo. At "Los Morros", approximately 10-15 silky sharks circled the boat continuously, making for an exciting safety stop. Lobsters, moray eels, octopus, Clarion angel, Moorish idol, Spanish hogfish, leather bass, surgeonfish, scorpionfish, red-tailed triggerfish, bigeye jack, amberjack, needlefish, torpedo rays, guineafowl and porcupine puffers, and scrawled filefish. We all wanted to dive before breakfast, but the captain would not grant our request to change the schedule. Upon arrival at San Benedicto, they instructed us to follow the stern line to the divesite; however, the line was at least 100 yards long and we were swimming against the current. We wasted too much air reaching the divesite. We wisely made the second dive from pangas. The diving conditions at San Benedicto

were poor for the first 2-1/2 days. The *Solmar V* was unable to anchor at "The Boiler," so long panga rides (20 minutes) were necessary. This limited our dives with mantas, which weren't always present in these conditions. We went to the military base on Socorro for the weekly inspection right after lunch, but had to wait approximately 45 minutes for the officers to arrive and they stayed on board for about 30 minutes. This delay cost us an afternoon dive. Because the *Solmar V* has been making this trip for eight years, the weekly inspection should be a mere formality now so valuable time is not wasted. No E-6 processing on board. Due to a payment dispute over a cancellation fee between Solmar and our travel agent (IDE), four of us were forced to pay \$316.25 each when we boarded. All of us had fully paid IDE in advance and were shocked. Both companies blamed each other and refused to refund our money. This was the worst example of diver victimization that I have ever experienced. Upon arrival we all assembled at the Solmar Suites hotel, where the divemaster collected our passports, checked our "C" cards and assigned cabins. They transferred us to the boat at approximately 3:00 P.M. for a 4:00 P.M. departure. At the end of the trip, we returned to Cabo about 8:30 P.M. and could go into town for some nightlife (a short walk from the marina dock). We spent the night on the boat and were shuttled either directly to the airport or back to the Solmar Suites hotel at 8:30 A.M. the next morning.

***Solmar V*, December 2001, Edw. C. Heimiller (heimiller@att.net)**  
**Streamwood, IL.** Vis: 15-50 ft. Water: 74-75 F. Logged dives: 4000+. After boarding in Cabo San Lucas, unpacking, we had a briefing on boat safety/operation, diving procedures and c-cards check. This was followed by dinner while we started the 20+ hour crossing. We arrived at the first dive site early the next afternoon. We dove Las Cueyas, El Boiler, Roch Partida, Cabo Pearce, Acurio and El Canon. Besides many different tropical fish and different species of tropical fish, we saw a sea lion, dolphins, sharks (white tip, silky, Galapagos and hammerheads), eels, octopus, lobster and manta rays that liked to be petted. Plus one whale shark.

***Solmar V*, Amigos Del Mar, December 2001, Donald Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net)**  
**Glendora, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 ft. Water: 75 to 79 F, calm. Weather: partly cloudy to clear. Great crew and divemasters. I had a room to myself and rooms are ok but not large. Some forward rooms (less expensive are small). Sea life, white tip, Galapagos, silky and hammerhead sharks aplenty. Mantas up close and personal, wanting to be touched. Schools of pelagic fish, tuna and occasional wahoo. Morays, many in same holes as lobsters. Large octopi on almost every dive. Lobsters by the caveful, but don't take any. Whale shark on our last dive. Great food. Sharks and mantas on all but one dive. Long trip out and

back 250 miles to first island. Viz is ok but not ginlike.

**Solmar V, February 2002, Ralph M. Bishop, Ithaca, NY.** 43 years diving. Getting to Cabo is easy — but don't take the shuttle to the hotel unless you want a two-hour ride while being a captive audience for timeshare sales. *Solmar V* is well maintained with friendly crew; my cabin was tiny — don't know how I would have managed if I'd had to share it. Food fairly good — no complaints. Diving a mixed bag — “the luck of the draw” is often operative on dive trips. Since there is no coral if the fish aren't there, the dive will be a bust. Manta dives at “The Boiler” were as advertised — plenty of chances to interact with them. Some divers compared other dive sites to quarry dives. The boat cannot always get to Roca Partida, which is a rock surrounded by 300-foot depths; we did get there, but the large quantities of sharks were at 150 feet — no way to really see them. Would have been a good double-tank deco dive, but, of course, this wasn't allowed. No whale sharks — fair number of humpback whales sighted on the surface. I did swim with several curious dolphins. Wear a jacket-style BCD, not a back-flotation one, since you may be spending a long time waiting on the surface on the panga dives — surface signaling devices are a must! One thing that surprised me is that U.S. fishing boats from San Diego are allowed to fish this “marine preserve.” I thought this was really stupid, but it is all too typical of what is happening everywhere else. Not a

bad trip for a quick getaway, but not “The World's Best Big Animal Diving” as they tout it.

**Solmar V, June 2002, Ken LaBarbera, Grass Valley, CA.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 5 to 30 Feet. Water: 57 to 78 F, currents. We flew into Cabo San Lucas a day early and stayed at the Solomar Suites, a first class operation with two large pool with swim-up bars. Food is pricey, but worth it. Solomar arranges airport transportation to and from the hotel. Pay the round trip \$25 in advance when you pay for the trip as airport transportation can run as high as \$50 each way! Solomar picks up at the Solomar Suites and transports to the boat. Solomar V does not take credit cards, a negative business practice. Upon arrival they informed us that a small hurricane had parked itself over the Socorro Islands and that we were heading to the Sea of Cortez. (Solomar later refunded \$550/pp for the change). I dove the upper, northern part of the Cortez for many years. I stopped when it became depleted of large critters — this trip was no different! Lots of plankton blooms, which limited visibility to 10-30 ft. max. Zip pelagics, many bone chilling thermoclines, lots of eels, small reef fish and boring (for me) nudibranchs. Real lousy conditions. I took three rolls of 36 exp., plus 126 digital shots. Sea mounts were a joke. They put a rope line down to the dive location for us to follow to the mount — couldn't tell we were there until we hit (100ft.+), the visibility was 0-5ft. Divers were not warned that jelly fish

get hung up on the ropes as some divers (me included) incurred stings on the hands and face. Abandon the rope descent or be the last in line. Lots of rocks, little coral. The dive master should survey underwater conditions and if warranted, go to an alternate dive site. This would have saved a lot of disappointing dives and grumbling. The divemaster (Axel) would insist that a dive site was great though we couldn't see 10 ft. and there was no large marine life! We would spend half the day at the same poor site! Due to poor visibility, dive masters couldn't watch the group or point out "special interest" items. We would often dive alone (no problem) and surface far away from each other! There were two pangas always in the water. Both did a great job! One panga driver (Geronimo) was always there to get us. He was a real asset to the boat crew. The service and food were first class. Regular rooms are small. Superior Suites are more comfortable and cost more, but worth it. Plenty of hot water in the room showers, food service and room make-up by Pepe was outstanding. Lots of steaks, fish, prawns, egg breakfasts, hot soup lunched etc. Solomar V needs a technician so that small repairs could be made to regs, BC's etc. I had a first stage problem on my new regulator and they told me that they were not technicians and to return the reg. where I bought it when I got home. The dive boat people offered no temporary replacement equipment. Fortunately, my dive buddy has a spare. No Nitrox or PADI certificate courses offered. Refills were quick

and easy. Help with gearing up was always there; dive stations were good and well kept. Diving the Cortez ranks in the top five worst locations I have dove in over 40 years. To the Solomar V's credit, they have apologized for the change of dive site and they claim they are working on some type of "incentive" to get us back on board for the Socorro trip. I won't hold my breath!

**Solmar V, July 2002, Sherry Carberry, Tampa, FL.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 69 to 78 F, calm. We were expecting water in the upper 70s to low 80s. When we arrived we were told the water was in the low 70s. We were able to rent heavy wet suits at the dive shop before getting on the boat. Wished we had been informed early so we would have been prepared with hoods. Ship was the nicest live-aboard we have been on and Axel was an excellent dive master. Crew was pleasant and worked hard to keep the guests happy. Visibility was often poor, the water cold, and sometimes a current. However, we did see a whale shark, two mantas, and large schooling fish. Highlights included diving with the sea lions that were very playful. We enjoyed the sea lions so much that we stayed for an extra afternoon to dive with them some more. I booked the trip 10 months in advance and then Solmar reduced the rate by \$200/person. I called Solmar and they refunded me \$200/person that I had paid.

**Solmar V, July 2002, Mike Toombs (toombs@attbi.com) Colleyville, TX.** Experience: Over 1000 dives.

Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 73 to 76 F, currents. Advertised as a luxury yacht. Would have gladly traded the etched glass and fancy paneling for more sound deadener and roll dampeners. Rooms were minuscule, 6 ft x 7 ft. Being 6 ft 2 in, I could not even stretch out on the horrible mattress. The room was so noisy and vibrating and the boat rolled so much, we slept on top deck when the friend of the owner (a non paying guest) was not having a loud drunken party. The room a/c was either on, a freezing 66F, or off, hot and stuffy. The mini combination shower, head, stunk. There was no storage space and we had a superior room. The briefings were lousy. They did not tell you about the ripping current that slammed you back into the boat after doing a giant stride. They told you to stay with the divemaster, who proceeded to do aerobic enduro swims, so when you stopped to take a picture, he was gone. We were picked up fairly quickly even when spread out. The food was okay, but if you were unlucky to be in the two tables closest to the kitchen, you had to evacuate immediately when finished, so the crew could be fed. This was our 9th live-aboard. This boat is definitely third rate. The diving could have been interesting, but the information supplied by the boat pre-trip said the water would be 80-82 F, it was 73-74 F. We froze. Photography table used by everyone for everything, with electrical connections under the stairs, where dripping water from those going to top deck ran onto plugs, chargers, batteries and photo equipment.

***Solmar V, Sea of Cortez, August 2002, Ken Mustello (kmustello@expertek.com) Carlisle, MA.*** Vis: 40-60. Water: 75-86 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130'/no deco. The staff on the *Solmar V* do an outstanding job. The food is excellent. Typical meals included shrimp, steak, sea bass, and traditional Mexican fare. Diving restrictions are flexible based on the experience of those aboard. Dive stations were spacious, but living quarters were cramped. Sea lions are seen on nearly every dive. Mantas were spotted on 2nd dive. It's hit or miss with other pelagics. Thermoclines in the Sea of Cortez cause water temperatures to drop significantly at depth. A full 3mm suit and hood are recommended. Tidal currents are also strong at times and may be of concern to inexperienced divers.

## UNITED STATES

### California

***Iron Eagle, February 2002, Ted Gold (tgold@racalate.com) Huntington Beach, CA.*** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 20 to 45 Feet. Water: 55 to 58 F, choppy surge, currents. Plenty of sea lion interaction off Santa Barbara Island. 3 Sisters dive spot fantastic for nudibranchs. Lots of room on board. Great food and nice accommodations. Some divers encountered bad air fills that are apparently an ongoing problem. No respect for the camera tables. The camera tables were at various times covered with ashtrays, drinks, a ships bell, BBQ utensils etc. The boat is a work in