

book through the Kona office. You'll pay twice as much. Also, when I asked whether the boat would be tied up and stable the last night, Friday, the Kona office assured me it would be. Do not believe them — the boat moors out to a buoy in the harbor the first night after boarding (Saturday) and the last night (Friday) and it is the worst ride of the whole trip. Book a room at the King Kam for Friday night and get off the boat when they return to harbor Friday afternoon. You're last chance to dive is Friday a.m., so you can book flights home from noon Saturday.

Kona Aggressor II, September, 2002, Keith & Ellen Irwin (irwinkw@earthlink.net), San Jose, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 Fahrenheit, calm, surge, no Currents. This is easy diving with a great crew and superb food and service. The boat is an 87' catamaran with five ensuite cabins off the large salon and a quad cabin on the top deck. All had queen size beds below and a single bunk above. A sink, vacu-flush head (no smells), and a shower are in each stateroom. A/C is controlled by individual thermostats and was comfortable. The food was fabulous. Christine is a graduate of the San Francisco Culinary Academy and Brian came from the Culinary Institute of America in New York. Both had wonderful creations but were very willing to adapt to meet individual needs. You hook up your own gear for the first dive. After that, your tank is immediately refilled after every dive. Fins stay on the dive deck and other

gear can go in a locker under your bench. Nitrox is 100 for the week. Water is the warmest his time of year.

I dove mostly with a polartec skin but used a 3 mil wetsuit at night. Others dove in a t-shirt and swimsuit. The very competent and friendly staff will leave you alone or go with you on the dive. At least one divemaster is in the water and another on the dive deck. The diving is typically shallow. I never exceeded 65 feet except at Au Au crater where we went to 100 feet to see a Lion Fish. The number of little critters far exceeds Caribbean diving. Also saw lots of eels and a number of turtles. Lots of opportunities for macro photographers. But the bottom is mostly lava formations covered with hard corals. No soft corals and few sponges. Not a lot of color. We saw few large critters. At the Maze, we spotted two very large tarpon cruising the drop off. And on the last night we were treated to a spectacular show by four Mantas who cavorted about for over an hour scooping plankton and other small critters attracted by the lights on the boat and the under water video cameras. It was breath taking. Porpoises often followed the boat but we didn't see any while diving. Dedicated dive table and 2 rinse tanks. Onboard processing. Video player on board. Captain Gui is a photo pro and very willing to share his knowledge.

MICRONESIA

Chuuk (Truk)

Odysey, Reg Bennett, San Marcos, CA. Vis: 50-70 ft. Water: 78-80 F.

Dives logged: 244. The *Odyssey* is the best live-aboard here. I appreciated the flexibility offered us by the crew. The pool was always open. Dive deep, solo, just let someone know you are in the water. Dove 13 wrecks in one week including the *San Francisco Maru* and the *Aikoku Maru*. Free Nitrox. The diving is for more advanced divers. (Ph: 800-757-5396 or (904) 346-3766 (US); e-mail info@TrukOdyssey.com; website www.trukodyssey.com)

Odyssey, October 2001, Thomas Sutherland, Kailua-Kona, HI. Vis: 80-100+ ft. Water: 78-82 F. Dives logged: 178. Dive restrictions enforced: 130' and 500 psi. As an underwater photographer they "assigned" a divemaster to guide me thru the wrecks. We had the opportunity to do 5-6 dives daily and were allowed 30E Nitrox fills on every dive. Two flights a week come into Chuuk airport. If it rains with wind the pilots will not land. Your end dates can be extended for up to 3-5 days just getting off the island and back to Guam.

Odyssey, January 2002, Frank Zegler (frankzeg@aol.com)
Idledale, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Water: 83 to 84 F, no currents. Take any of these wrecks and put it in say the Caribbean and it would become a destination all by itself. Here there are dozens for you to explore, covered with masses of soft and hard coral, giant anemones in several flavors, schooling barracuda and tuna, stampedes of Moorish idols, a zillion other tropicals, jacks,

baitfish. Overall life intensity is higher than either Palau or Yap. The decks tend to be 70 to 100 ft but due to the tall kingposts and superstructure you can slowly drift up as no-deco time evaporates while still having a magnificent view of prolific invertebrate and fish life. Seen from below these tall mast — like structures resemble a giant redwood — the clouds of fish acting as shimmering leaves. Dive times can be over an hour on most wrecks that intensifies the experience. Shark feed held on the barrier reef — in which large snappers show that they are real predators too. Watching a couple of dozen sharks swarm a tuna gives the old viscera a bit of a tweak. Also amusing is watching the poor remoras detaching, trying to get out of the way, chasing down shredded tuna without being a prey item themselves and then trying to find their shark again. Beaches near dynamited reefs (only recently curtailed) are weird with huge chunks of broken coral tossed up with each wave — not a place to go strolling in the surf. As for the *Odyssey*, Lenny and Cara have set a new standard of price/performance. Cabins are large with some having doors direct to the exterior. Heads are comfortable and hot water was never a problem. They provide free Nitrox (pumping 30-31%) and have a selection of larger steel tanks and doubles besides standard 80's. Other Nitrox mixes are available at a surcharge. All diving (with minor exceptions when individuals want to split from the group) is done from the *Odyssey* so tedious skiff rides are eliminated. You can dive whenever

you want — which means that you can have the wreck to yourself if you time it right. A deployed deco bar makes that safety stop fun when the boat swings back and forth in the wind — sometimes you get moving fast enough to interest the remoras. Dive briefings were excellent but even better were the plastic slates they sell. With the wreck shown schematically, depths annotated and all the points of interest marked it was painless to navigate around these behemoths. Diving is conducted through most of the Saturday before Sunday departure. You can dive to the limits of that computer. Chuuk has strong trade winds during the winter which makes going out in small craft entertaining at best. They told us that wind induced water exchange in the lagoon increases water clarity in the winter as opposed to the summer. Visibility ran 50 to 80 feet with maybe 100 on the reef edge. Separate entertainment, sundeck and dining areas that allow readers, gabbers and movie watchers to coexist. *Odyssey* goes to locations that the day boats don't. Wear and tear on these seldom visited wrecks is noticeably less. They did some deco diving on the *San Francisco Maru* — truly a great wreck that is usually bounce dived by most visitors. Akk and one dive guide will show you around the wrecks — which can be twisty places with lots of intriguing corners. Steve took his time and let the gawkers in tow have a chance to absorb where they really were. The food was not on par with the rest of the experience. Plenty of variety but the quality needs to be addressed. The

cooks need more training. A special diet was a challenge to the cooks and seemed to be done reluctantly. And there was only limited advantage taken of locally caught fish. No recompression chamber operational on Chuuk. You must go to Guam. Before our arrival two folks were bent, one seriously. One victim was bent on the first day. Everyone should be paranoid about hydration after the long flights there in combination with dives with more continuous deep time than most reef profiles would demand. Also there is the ever present temptation to descend even deeper into those beckoning holds. The folks on these trips that had the bent divers lost considerable dive time so maybe peer pressure will get people to be more cautious. Lenny and Cara should mention this at the outset of the trip. Most folks in skins and 3mm were shivering by dive two despite the 84F water. For bent divers, special transport has to be arranged and one diver took 36 hours to start the evacuation — using aircraft flown in from Australia. The island of Weno where the Blue Lagoon Resort is and where the *Odyssey* skiff picks you up is in a sad state. Despite millions in payments from the US over the years the infrastructure and people overall seem to have benefited only minimally. We doubted the guidebooks that implored people not to walk through the town at night or in the day alone. But American doctors helping the local hospital and confirmed that gang violence is very real. A favorite weapon seems to be a metal dart made from sharpened rebar propelled by

surgical tubing. They had the x-rays to prove it. We had a wonderful experience when making an unplanned landing on Fefan in our kayaks. The whole town of mostly kids it seemed — probably 80 people in all — surrounded us and we had a sort of Margaret Mead experience. We felt totally welcomed by that town and were chuckling with the island women when the local Mormon missionaries strolled by in long dark pants, white shirts and skinny little black ties — as incongruous a sight on a tropical island as can be imagined.

Odyssey, April 2002, Ron & Henni Ray (scuba@ctaz.com) Needles, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm.

Boat is beautiful. All staterooms are spacious with either two twins or one queen size bed. Also, two cabins for singles. Total of 16 guests max. Food was wonderful and special requests were cheerfully accommodated. Crew was outstanding with the Captains/owners, Lenny and Cara at the top of the list. We felt like we were visiting friends at their home. A cat (Shasta) is kept in the Captains' quarters unless the guests insist (and we all did) she be let out to play in the evenings.

Although you could go to at least 130 feet on all the wrecks, the decks generally were at 50-80 feet and there was lots to see such as tanks, trucks, artillery guns, dishes, saki bottles, even airplane parts and fuselages. On a couple of wrecks, the masts rose to within 30-40 feet of the surface and they were covered with beautiful soft corals and tropical fish life. The

predive briefings were thorough and described what holds were easily penetrated and which ones to avoid. You could explore by yourself or follow a divemasters — there was always at least one divemaster in the water. Three divers wanted to dive the *San Francisco Maru* that is a deco dive — they were taken by tender to do so and the rest of us stayed on board and dived a shallower wreck. We went outside the Lagoon and did a shark feed dive that was fun. Nitrox (30%) and steel 112's available at no additional charge. Our only bad experience was our return on Continental Airlines. We had purchased our tickets six months prior, confirmed the flights three times (including from the *Odyssey*), checked in at the airport six hours before we would be departing from Guam and were told the plane was overbooked and there were no seats, but to check in Guam. When we got to Guam we were told by the gate agent that the flight was overbooked and locals had priority! We therefore were on standby and if there were any seats left after all the locals had boarded, they would let us know half an hour before departure. There were a couple dozen other passengers in the same situation — we made it on.

Thorfinn, June 2002, Ron Bender.

Two weeks aboard the *SS Thorfinn* steaming from Chuuk Lagoon to Pohnpei in Micronesia. The air conditioning struggled to keep ahead of the heat generated by the engine while underway. After being anchored

for a few days the a/c seemed to cool the rooms. The food, while tasty and well prepared is not apportioned evenly. One person may receive a pork steak half the size of the plate and the next person a portion half the size of a paper dollar! There are no seconds! They ration the fresh water at meal times. You have to ask for water and refills are not forthcoming. Wine and beer are served with dinner if you ask, refills are not offered. Wine consumed other than at meal times is \$4 per glass! The ice machine does not make ice while the ship is moving — the motion of the ship precludes the compressor from working. Bring your own dive light. The dive lights the boat rents at \$10 per dive, have a battery life of 30 minutes! That, as the Captain says, is normal! (Ph: +691 330-3040 (Chuuk); e-mail Seaward@mail.fm; website www.thorfinn.net)

Truk Aggressor, February 2002, Bill & Jeanne Downey (downdive@attbi.com) Baden, PA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm no currents. The below-deck cabins are small and dark, but each had its own bathroom, and we spent little time in the cabins. We occasionally got a whiff of the holding tank, but it wasn't constant. Meals were good, the staff personable, and we had a great time. Easy entry off the back onto reef diving atop wrecks. Truk Lagoon isn't just for wreck diving there's plenty of fish life. Although many dives are 100' or more, you can work your way up the masts, finding all kinds of critters,

extending your bottom time. It was definitely a plus not having to dive from skiffs. Coral was in good shape, although many smaller items, such as bullets and morphine ampules, have disappeared from the wrecks since we dove Chuuk 12 years ago. When we asked if we could skip the night dives and do dusk dives instead, it was no problem; dinner was even moved back 1/2 hour to accommodate us. The dusk dives were great, with lots of fish coming around the wrecks. There were critters on the night dives, but it took a lot of hunting to find them. The showers on the lower back deck area were great, some of us never took a shower anywhere else. Our camera had been washed overboard the previous week on the *Palau Aggressor* skiff — we were able to use a Nikonos at no charge. The 2:30 A.M. flights are killers! (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Truk Aggressor II, April 2002, Dennis Johnson, New York, NY. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. Capt. Tom Kleefeld and his crew (Brian, Ed, Junior, Lolo, Hope, Johny and Rickson) from the time we were picked up at the Blue Lagoon Resort to being dropped at the airport went beyond what I expected. Capt. Tom was thorough and clear on boat operation, schedules and safety. The crew worked like a well-oiled machine. Everything from choosing dive sites, dive briefings, guiding dives to the diver check-out/check-in board was done according to plan. All diving

was from the mother ship. The meals were excellent with delicious and varied menus — from fresh sushi to a full turkey dinner with all the trimmings and fresh bread every day. Fantastic snacks after every dive. Brian the photo pro was helpful with tips and recommendations (as well as processing film quickly). Slide shows every night by different crew members. The local Chuukese crew (Lolo, Junior, Rickson, Johnny, Hope) were always around, friendly and helpful — guiding dives, cooking great food, working the dive deck, etc. At the end of the week, Capt. Tom drove the group to the airport getting us there ten minutes before the crowds from the other boats to allow us to check in first. He came back an hour later with cold drinks making sure the plane was on time. Four people in my group had the new “quad cabin” on the upper deck behind the wheelhouse — nice with lots of room and big windows. The only thing wanting was the size of the cabins, however so little time was spent below deck it didn’t matter. One forward cabin had a “bad smell.” Large camera table and dedicated rinse buckets. Crew careful with equipment. Light boxes and mounting supplies provided free. Dive guides were “very” helpful in finding and leading to interesting parts of the wrecks inside and out. **(Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)**

Palau

Big Blue Explorer, October 2001,
Jeanne L. Fielder, Portage, MI. Vis:

60-100 ft. Water: 86 F. Logged dives: 375. Dive restrictions enforced: Timed dives. Large boat with excellent tenders to run to dive sites. Most less than 15 minutes away. Excellent crew — always there to help and meet your needs without you asking. Well run operation overall. Great weather. **(Ph: 877- 417- 6160 (US & Canada) or 562- 865- 7198; e-mail info@palauscuba.com (US/Canada) or explorer@palauscuba.com; website www.palauscuba.com)**

Big Blue Explorer, March 2002,
James Grim (yorkdivers@aol.com)
York, PA. Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dives accrued: 5000+. Dive restrictions enforced: 45 mins/130 ft. Excellent food, best dive briefings. 4-5 dives a day, Nitrox available. Warm towels after every dive. Fresh water showers on deck (6). They load and unload your equipment. Staff was excellent. Ship is not shiny new, but rooms are clean and roomy. Plenty of hot water.

Big Blue Explorer, Scuba World,
March 2002, Kinson Tong
(kinsontong@netvigator.com) New Territories, NT. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 28 to 32 Celsius, calm currents. We have 16 guests on *MV Big Blue Explorer* (BBE) and we were separated into two chase-boats, “Hammerhead” and “Gray Reef.” Both are spacious, with a rinse tank for cameras on board and fast — usually takes 10-15 minutes to get to the dive sites. Crews on the BBE were friendly and helpful. We usually leave our gear on the chase boat during the day. After last dive, we take our snorkels, masks, fins and

flash lights and the crew members take care of the rest. Tanks will be changed by the crew member before every dive. Nitrox divers analyze the tanks on their own, and put their name on the tank so that the crew will know which BC to mount the tank onto. Dive briefings are detailed. The guides draw the dive site on a white board and explain what to look for, the original and backup plan (in case the current changed or the mantas are not around). Matt and Karen were our guides. They are attentive and interesting people. When I was doing the cave dive, Karen asked me if I were okay after I surfaced in the 1st chamber. Karen told me that I was breathing hard which I didn't even notice. BBE is really spacious. Food is always tasty and more than enough. The boat has a strong team and the operation was smooth. Maximum five dives/day (incl. night dive). Snacks or meals between dives. Nonalcoholic drinks are free. My wife needed ear drops so Elaine (the boat manager) just gave us one! BBE makes their own water so you don't have to worry about running out of water during the trip. Diving fabulous! Lots of sea fan corals and sharks. Didn't see many manta rays. None on our first dive at German Channel. However we saw five of them cruising in a straight line after we did the "Manta Dance" that Matt taught. We saw a group of 30 dolphins. We stopped our chase boat and played. Did Blue Corner three times. Spotted eagle ray, many sharks and an interesting Napoleon wrasse. It swam thru the "hooked" divers and tried to get in front of the divers with a

camera. Also, saw an ornate eagle ray! Reef hooks provided by BBE are short — wished I had my own with a longer rope attached to it. Cabins on deck B are usually larger, so I'd ask for deck B cabins next time. If you're not using a US power socket, bring an adapter. BBE has their own transformer, to change 110V to 220V. Went to Palau Pacific Resort (PPR) for a brunch, went to the Giant Clam farm and Palau Aquarium (which is worth going). We saw the only nurse shark at Palau Aquarium we saw on this trip. We had a room at West Plaza by the Sea and had lunch/dinner at Seahorse Restaurant in the hotel). Seahorse is an Indian restaurant with international dishes. Have to try the butter chicken and nan. Try the "Mango Lassi" (mango yogurt drink). West Plaza by the Seas has a clean room, air-conditioning a bit noisy (bring a pair of ear plugs). Stay at the deluxe rooms. Standard rooms are really small and you basically get no windows. We upgraded to deluxe after we've seen how bad the standard rooms are.

Ocean Hunter, January 2002,
Martin J. Raff (oisshasan@aol.com)
Louisville, KY. Vis: 50-100 ft.
Water: 85-88 F. The reefs were damaged (El Niño?) and coral was often dead or dying but soft corals were making a comeback. **(Ph: 011-680-488-2637 (Palau); e-mail Ocean.Hunter@palaunet.com; website www.oceanhunter.com)**

Palau Aggressor, January 2002,
Scott L. Kramer
(scottkca@earthlink.net) Los

Angeles, CA. Vis: 20-40 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dives logged: 396. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft., air in tank. It takes three airplane connections to get to Palau, a long hike, but worth it. The boat is still in excellent condition. Alcohol/beer is included in cover price, but once served, no more diving that day. All diving is done from the fast moving tender so once the tanks were set up, they stayed on the tender. We never had to worry about them. All fills were 3000+, and if short, alternate tanks were found. Currents were always changing so some dives didn't go as planned. Considerable evidence of bleaching at most shallow dive sites. Blue Corner was done three times, once with no current, so no large pelagics that dive. Massive traffic jam at Blue Holes when two other dive boats placed divers there simultaneously. Jellyfish Lake is back and along with Chandelier Caves, made for a great last day of shallow dive activities. Eliminated five dive schedule most days and substituted a twilight dive as the forth and final dive of the day, which got the approval of all. Sweetie, the resident Napoleon Wrasse still amored of Hector, one of the DM's. Wonderful and varied selection of meals thanks to Andrew and Rose, the chocolate chip cookie pie a highlight! Treated us to a mini shark feed off the back of the boat. Only two minor rain squalls all week. Unfortunate diver had to be removed from the boat to go to the hospital (malaria contracted months before became active) but no dives were lost. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-

2628; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Palau Aggressor, January 2002, Frank Zegler (frankzeg@aol.com)
Idledale, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Palau is not truly optimal for a live aboard — especially when weather and cost are factored in. This is especially true in the “dry” months between December and April when the trade winds blow — and can blow hard (20-25 kts steady) for weeks. This brings unfriendly seas, occasionally intense daylong rains and makes diving less than fun a few days each week. The surf break at Ngemelis Island (near Blue Corner) is Hawaiian in scope; quite impressive! Surge against some walls at 30-40 feet can be significant. However once you are on that live-aboard you feel compelled to dive every day when really the best would be to take that crummy day off. Exacerbating this is the method of diving from a smallish skiff that they hoist out of the water onto the *Aggressor* after each dive. This skiff is not as sea competent as the day boats simply because of size. Yes the boat rides are shorter. But can be pummeled by bone jarring twenty minute boat rides back to the *Aggressor*. Going to more distant places like Peleliu is no easier on the *Aggressor* under these conditions than using a day boat — the *Aggressor* itself never moved more than 5 km south of the New Drop area. All divers are on board and in the water in lockstep. You should anticipate being in the water with 12-16 other people. In

concentrated areas such as Blue Corner the wildlife viewing was seriously diminished by the curtains of bubbles and conflicts in viewing caused by so many divers. Our experiences with 4-6 people on a day boat were far better. The *Aggressor's* arrangements fall close to the rip-off level. Although all persons are onboard Sunday, our boat did not leave until Monday morning — to a very close-in check out dive on the Chuyo. Diving at the Blue Corner/ Ngemelis area could not start until noon. No diving Saturday (only a snorkel to the jellyfish lake that could have been done anytime during the week). Flights out of Koror do not leave until late Sunday meaning that a whole day of diving could have been done Saturday with plenty of time to off gas. Getting five dives a day is unrealistic. Night diving was frustrating since none of the classic walls are dove at night, which should be a great advantage of being on a live-aboard anchored fifteen minutes away. Instead some sites were ones where El Niño did its worst. Bleached, depopulated reef with a few straggler fish. Wonder Channel was dove only once despite this being a truly outstanding night drift dive. The crew although clearly competent divers and boat operators were not adept at picking sites based on conditions. Palau is tidally affected and wind also plays a key role. Sites seemed to be chosen based on some preplanned itinerary or people's unrealistic desires rather than reality. Everyone should pick up a set of tide tables when in Palau and recognize that places like

German Channel or Uulong Channel can be either sublime or boring depending on tidal flows. Generally, incoming tides bring better conditions. Tides in the south of the islands are offset by nearly an hour from those north. Food as prepared by Dave was excellent. He did a great job with variety and quality. Tank filling was good though the rule not to go near the skiff with the tanks while filling was absurd and made sampling the Nitrox at the last moment a hassle. Crew responsiveness was lacking. Requests to raise the temperature in the common areas above the meat-locker level were partially responded to. It was almost funny to see everyone wearing every stitch of clothing they had at the final slide show when the outside temp was 78. Requests to omit fabric softener so that the nice towels they supplied us would actually absorb water were effectively ignored. You can stay at the most expensive hotel in Koror, have more flexibility to deal with tides and weather, explore more territory, have access to Nitrox, and still have three dives a day (or at least two good ones) for less money. The only significant downer is the boat ride duration — which taken in total may actually be less than shuttling back and forth to the live-aboard. If anyone brings a Pro48 to Palau as a day boat the live-aboards are dead. We were appalled at the *Aggressor* (and apparently all the other live-aboards too) practice of dumping waste water less than 2 miles off the east coast of the islands. Given the business they are in there is simply no excuse for this. The Palauan government has

been trying to get them to use municipal treatment and pump out at the docks. They have fought this for some time now — the diving community should insist that the *Aggressor* franchise do the right thing and stop dumping sewage near reefs simply because they don't dive those eastern reefs. If clouds of pyramid butterflies, cruising sharks, schooling barracuda, jacks, tuna, and mackerel are what you want to see while being serenaded by the background sound of spinner dolphins, Blue Corner is the place to go. The Siaes area was also nice especially with a strong current to draw the bigger animals. We ran into mantas in German Channel but they are not reliable. Be aware of full moons — hatchouts of tasty tidbits are sometimes synchronized to these and can draw filter feeders of every size. Wonder Channel would be worth doing several times — especially at night. If you crave high relief hard corals with intense reef fish activity you may be disappointed. El Niño really did zap those ecosystems. Every rock island was brown from lack of rain and full recovery is still years away. You can see real regrowth — some unbelievably fast — but reestablishment of complete reef ecosystems will take more years. Coral was best at the Big Drop area, which also had intense cleaner station activity with big fish checking in at salon de wrasse for some needed maintenance. There is more living hard coral on some wrecks in Chuuk than at any dive site in Palau. Do not ignore the shallows in Palau in the rock islands or Uulong. Most of these

are off the radar of thrill-driven wall divers but there are more big fish, giant clams and interesting weird stuff in less than 10 feet of water than seems possible. While wading in 10 inches of water a Giant Trevally 16 inches high (how do I know? — the Palauan standing next to us speared the thing — it had to weigh 30 pounds) darn near beached himself between our feet chasing sardines.

Palau Aggressor, February 2002, Jeanne & Bill Downey (downdive@attbi.com) Baden, PA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. The *Palau Aggressor* is a catamaran, so it's spacious, with nice sized cabins, en-suite baths, and roomy decks. Meals, served buffet style, were very good. The entire crew was friendly and tried to please. We enjoyed everything about the boat. The walls were hit hard by El Niño 3 years ago and the coral and fish life was worse than we expected. One wall had 2-3" new growth, the others were pretty barren. Although there was still enough to see during dives, we were disappointed, especially after having dived Palau previously. We stopped night diving after doing three, because there was not a lot to see. Beginner/intermediate divers will still have a great time, but well-traveled divers might want to wait a few years. On the way to Blue Corner, our overloaded (22 people) skiff was hit by several waves, almost capsizing the boat. One divemaster was launched into the air while trying to stabilize the boat, and our housed Nikon N90 camera was

also launched overboard when the 2-3 feet of water inside the skiff lifted the gas tanks and the plywood upon which all the cameras were sitting. Luckily, the other cameras hung up on various parts of the motors and railings, and were saved. Bring some kind of line to attach your camera to the railing around the camera platform on the skiff.

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Jeanne & Bill Downey, Baden, PA.**

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the other cameras hung up on various parts of the motors and railings, and were saved. Bring some kind of line to attach your camera to the railing around the camera platform on the skiff. To repay us, the owner gave us two free trips on the *Tahiti Aggressor*.

***Palau Aggressor II*, April 2002,
Dennis Johnson, New York, NY.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Second trip on the *Palau Aggressor II* (my first trip was in 1997). "coral bleaching" problem isn't as bad as I expected and Jellyfish Lake had literally millions more jellyfish than it did first time around. The diving was even better than I remembered — Blue Corner, Blue Hole, Peleliu Corner absolutely fantastic. Diving from the skiff is as easy as it gets. The skiff drivers were there whenever/wherever you surfaced (EPIRBs were issues to all diver pairs just in case one of us got away). The *Aggressor* itself according to the crew has not been in dry-dock for at least seven years (it hadn't been renovated since my first trip)! And while it's kept clean and organized the entire boat shows serious wear and tear. The bilge pumps periodically ran (loudly) due to leaks in the hull and the fridge in the galley was dead by the end of the week. The rooms were OK with good AC and plumbing. My only real complaint was a general indifference by the crew (especially after the tab was settled) and the inability to keep a schedule during the day — to get 4/5 dives a day in, I always felt like things

were rushed and on the verge of not happening. On the last day we were so behind schedule that we never made it to town as planned and didn't get to eat dinner before needing to get to the airport. There wasn't any standout service except from Doug the Photopro and Rick a new divemaster who really cared about the guests. This was the second week for my group on back to back *Aggressor* trips (*Truk Aggressor* was week 1) and while the Truk boat/crew totally spoiled us, the Palau boat/crew left something to be desired — as they say “there is a choice in airlines and live-aboards today.” E-6, large camera table and dedicated rinse buckets. Most of the crew careful with equipment. Doug was helpful with advice and accommodating to all requests. Doug took lots of pics of the guests for his end of the week slide show — he then gave away all the slides — nice touch! Light boxes and mounting supplies provided free.

Palau Aggressor, August 2002, Jonathan Clemmer (jclemmer@verizon.net) Pittsburgh, PA. Dives logged: 75. Vis: 50-100 ft. average, pending on tide. Water: 82 F. Diving restrictions: Dives typically kept to an hour. My travel agency was Island Dreams of Houston. Tina was helpful and quick to respond to all my e-mails. Particularly when it came to changing plans to coordinate with friends. She was able to get me a good overall package. The agency knows Micronesia well. From Houston Continental flight #1 to Guam stops in Honolulu for a couple of hours where

they change planes. Also, “power ports” for laptops are only available in the first five rows of coach. From Guam, it's another two hours to Palau. I departed at 6:30 a.m. Friday and arrived in Palau at 7:00 p.m. Saturday. I wasn't rested until Tuesday, the second day of diving on the *Aggressor*. First night was spent at the Palau Pacific Resort (PPR). Not really worth the \$225 (double occupancy)/night but it's nice if you can afford it. Good food, beach, snorkeling, and on-site dive operation (Splash). PPR and many dive operators are set up for Japanese guests. I did not a problem with dive “cattle boats.” I did see several boats with many Japanese snorkelers, but not that many divers. I think it is dependent on the time of year, so avoid Japanese holiday seasons. *Aggressor*, Sam's Tours and Fish 'n Fins cater to Americans and Europeans. Other outfits (such as Neco) are oriented toward Japanese visitors. The West Plaza Desekel has several properties, reasonably priced, convenient, with friendly staff. Pickups and drop offs were prearranged and efficient. Rooms were large, though nothing special but comfortable and air-conditioned. My first live aboard experience and it was quite enjoyable. My cabin had ample storage space, a reasonable shower/toilet combo, a single upper and queen lower berth, with sink. Climate control was in each room as was a window. *Aggressor* people pick you up for the Sunday afternoon boarding. You'll read that the *Aggressor* docks at the “M-dock.” This changes so don't assume you can find it as there are

several docks in Koror, all quite industrial. The boat is a catamaran style and not good in open/choppy water. Therefore, they keep it in the protected waters inside the reef and send out a 30-foot skiff to the sites. The travel time could take 10-30 minutes or more, cramping an already packed dive schedule of 4-5 dives a day. All dives were group dives from the skiff. Backwards roll into the water. Due to choppy waters, the skiff had its two outboard motors running all the time. Good buoyancy control is a must! The skiff is well organized. Everyone has an assigned seat with convenient under seat storage for fins, mask, lights. Your BC stays on the skiff all the time attached to the cylinder behind the seat. The seats are padded and the rides quite comfortable although if the seas are choppy, as they were for us much of the time, it's like going through a car wash. The local dive guides (Ike and Hector) were great at handling the skiff while picking up divers in heavy seas. All the divers on this trip were quite experienced. The guys and gals in the crew were for the most part young. But they had good experience, were expert divers, aware of the needs and safety of everyone. They really worked hard to keep us happy and comfortable. The eleven guests and nine crew had a lot of fun. Our cook was from the Gulf Coast (where I grew up), so I was quite happy with nicely prepared Southern comfort food. There were a few meals with Asian accented dishes that were good as well. The *Aggressors* do not necessarily go out every week. If you

book your trip well in advance, check back and verify that they are sufficiently booked. If they don't have a minimum number of guests, they might not sail. The *Aggressor* spent most of the time anchored in the Central Rock Islands, Ulong Island and Southern Rock Islands (German Channel). The Lovely Planet Diving and Snorkeling Palau was quite helpful. The boat moved around depending on conditions. We did not go to the southern most area of Peleliu. The Blue Corner, Blue Holes, Wonder Channel, Siaes Tunnel and Corner are all spectacular. Great healthy coral, hard and soft, sea fans, small and large critters, cuttlefish, nudibranchs, lots of reef sharks, turtles, occasional eagle ray, eel, and octopus. No whales, whale sharks or mantas however. They took us to Jelly Fish Lake and Chandelier Cave. Wreck dives are closer to Koror and best dived with a land-based operation. Upon checking out from the *Aggressor*, they charged us a \$15 Koror State Use permit, a \$20 Palau State Dive permit, and a \$35 weekly Cabin (hotel) tax. They give you a nice little certificate, which you need if you do any touring with the land-based operations. The Rock Islands are spectacular, best seen from a small boat or kayak. Take a half-day (\$50), day (\$90) or overnight (\$150) to see the Rock Islands up close and quietly with Sam's Tours. They offer kayak trips (guided if you wish) that are really great. We took a few extra days and dived with Fish 'n Fins. They were nice as well. Everyone had Nitrox available and both had a decent

dive shop. On land, all the conveniences of the U.S. are present — lots of markets opened early and closed late, restaurants, ATM, Internet cafes, taxis and shops. Koror is a dusty little town with no apparent zoning, few sidewalks, and no attempt to make it attractive. It seemed safe, everyone was friendly, and you could easily walk through much of the town in half an hour. Fresh produce is limited but reasonably priced. I found the Lonely Planet Guide to Micronesia to be quite helpful in finding my way around. There are a couple of museums including a coral museum/aquarium on the “M-dock” next to Fish ‘n Fins.

***Pelagian*, April 2002, Jerry Loveless (JerryL3515@aol.com) Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. Starting in Palau last February, they cruised the islands of Micronesia and Melanesia in 2-3 week segments, ending back in Bali in early 2003. We chose Yap to Truk a 23-day trek. The boat is 200+ ton, 115 feet long, well equipped and well turned out in beautiful wood finish. The five guest cabins are comfortable and spacious, as are the lounge, the photo room and the dive deck. Starting in Yap we visited approximately fourteen islands/atolls on the route from Yap to Truk (including, if you’ve got your atlas out: Yap, Ulithi, Bulubul, Zhhoiiyain Bank, Sorol, Eauripik, Ifalik, Lamotrek, West Fayu, Satawal, Pulawat, Ulul and Chuuk (Formerly known as Truk). Some islands we stopped for a day, others as many as

three days. It was a wonderful voyage of discovery, since none of us knew what to expect under the surface. Operating out of two twin engine dinghies we were quickly at dive sites. All were drift dives we were picked up depending upon individual air consumption. We did have professional photographer Tim Rock along and he’d been to a number of the islands in earlier years. We made a number of shore visits with the local people who were happy to see us. They gave us tours of their villages and performed native dances. Gifts were given to the chiefs and to the children and the trading between divers/crew and the locals was lively. On one island we were the first ship to visit in a year so they were happy to see us and to trade with us. Diving all along as fascinating. Many large schools of fish on almost every dive and sharks were always around for excitement. There was enough variety for the most discriminating taste. As is sometimes the case, there was one malcontent guest who was impossible to please, although heaven knows this crew tried and tried. We were able to overcome the “gloom” and we all (at least the rest of us) had a wonderful time. *Pelagian* will resume her Bali-Komodo trips in 2003. (Ph: 800-962-0395 (US) or +66 (76) 263-732 (Thailand); e-mail sales@diver-asiapacific.com; website www.dive-asiapacific.com)

***Sun Dancer*, July 2001, Matt Brandt (skicheese@aol.com) Los Angeles, CA.** Vis: 30-80 ft. Water: 80-84 F. Dives accrued: 259. Dive restrictions

enforced: be responsible. Only six divers on board so I could have my own room. Rooms are comfortable. Dive staff was excellent and attentive, captain was sick and stayed in his room for most of trip. Food was top notch. All diving is from a tender that picked up divers in a timely manner. Quite a bit of particulates in the water. Currents were moderate, shark action on many dives, circling schools of jacks and barracudas. Crocodile fish, giant clams, lots of very aggressive titan triggers — our group including divemasters were struck numerous times. Great array of tropicals. *Sun Dancer* is a comfortable, clean and photographer friendly boat! (Ph: 800-932-6237 or 305-669-9391; e-mail dancer@peterhughes.com; website www.peterhughes.com)

***Sun Dancer II*, January 2002, Dale Treadway (trdwy@tconl.com)**
Omaha, NE. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm currents. Wall dives full of wonderful hard and soft coral of many colors, schools of fish. Blue Corner action of sharks, schools of barracuda and fish and huge bumphead wrasse exciting. Reports of bleaching overdone. German Channel had spots that were noticeable but otherwise never noticed any. All dives were drift dives. The Philippine Sea and Pacific Ocean come together at Peleliu Point and the current was ripping! The staff obviously felt us divers were up to it and it was a thrill but was it safe? Two days later four divemasters from a land-based operation dove the same site (Peleliu

Express) and became lost at 11am when their chase boat couldn't find them. They had ascended after 18 minutes and could see the boat but drifted away into the Pacific Ocean. They were found seven hours later together and ok after a search by 20+ boats and two aircraft. They were miles east of Blue Corner. *Sun Dancer II* crew was friendly, diverse, fun yet serious about making sure we had a great time. *Sun Dancer II* is very comfortable. All cabins and salon had a/c, everything worked, food and service was very good + and no shoes for a week. It's a long plane ride, not cheap, and you may have some jet lag when you return.

***Sun Dancer II*, January 2002, William Renninger (billr@krcpension.com) Harrisburg, PA.** Vis: 40-60 ft. Water: 83 F. Dives accrued: 75. The *Sun Dancer II* is a beautiful ship. The cabins were fairly large and comfortable. The quantity and quality of the food was great. The ship was only half booked so we had plenty of room. The weather was nice, but a bit windy for Jan. Four dives per day was a treat. Three night dives are offered on Tues., Wed., and Thurs. Do not bother to pack a lot of clothing. 2-3 swimsuits, and a few shorts and t-shirts will be enough. Overall a great dive operation.

NEW ZEALAND

***MSY Wind Song*, Windstar Cruises, April 2002, Jose Kirchner, Carmichael, CA.** Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 62 to 66 F, calm, choppy. For upscale dive cruising, Windstar Cruises operates 4 motor sailing