

"Muck diving" (0-40 ft) where we found the strangest creatures ever! Week one we encountered strong currents and clouds, week two brought sunshine and little current. See our trip photos and additional info at [www.descentline.com](http://www.descentline.com). After disembarking, we checked into Walindi. On August 5 dormant volcano Mount Pago erupted and closed the airport stranding everyone. Again, Peter Hughes Diving came through for us: *Star Dancer* came back to Walindi to help. We and other guests became stowaways! Via ship's phone and e-mail they helped us arrange new flights out of Rabaul. Must haves in PNG: trip insurance, phone/e-mail addresses of family at home and most importantly a desire for unexpected adventure. The trip of a lifetime.

**Telita, February 2002, Ridgely Duvall ([wokwhisk@attbi.com](mailto:wokwhisk@attbi.com))**  
**Cambridge, MA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 125 Feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, calm. Boarded the recently refitted *Telita* at Tufi. Had seven friendly and helpful crew to the eight (of a possible 10) of us. They became friends. Captain Jack Martin, ex-shrimp fisherman (Gulf of Carpentaria), fascinating raconteur, gentle and capable, dove with us about half our dives, which averaged four per day (air only), as we made our way south toward the China Straits. Jack was a knowledgeable guide and enthusiastic naturalist; he was trying to learn the ins and outs of a new darkroom and had mixed success. Some photographers were disap-

pointed. (Ph: +612 93993936; e-mail [info@telitacruises.com](mailto:info@telitacruises.com); website [www.telitacruises.com](http://www.telitacruises.com))

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

**Bilikiki, June 2002, Nick Ferris.** The *Bilikiki* operation is based in Honiara, Guadalcanal, capital of the Solomon Islands. There is a sister ship, the *Spirit of the Solomons*. The *Bilikiki* has ten spacious air-conditioned staterooms, all about the same size, each with its own private "facility." The crew of 11 includes managers/divemasters Monte Sheppard and Michelle Gaut, a delightful and competent Australian couple. The ship serves tasty three meals a day plus in-between cookies, popcorn, and fruit. Drinks from the bar on the honor system. Most diving is from two "tinnies," aluminum open boats that pickup divers after each dive. Divers are helped back aboard via the ladder at the stern. But first the boatman takes the camera from the diver and stows it forward. There is a large, sheltered, 2-layered camera table on the dive deck. Two large dip tanks are off limits to anything but cameras. As more cameras come back from a dive, those in the tanks are removed to the table. In the salon are more tables for camera preparation. E-6 processing is available (US\$11). First, rigged tanks are loaded into the tinnies. Then cameras, then divers. A divemaster or boat handler helps each diver into his B.C. Only six divers per tinny. The back roll is executed on the count of "three." Some memorable confusion developed with the introduction of

“two and a half” into the count. Divers do as they please as long as it is safe. Usually five dives per day, including a night dive. Three visits to native villages, where some very well made and attractive wood carvings (bowls, table tops, wall hangings in marine motif) could be bought. One visit involved examining the wreckage of a WW Two B-24 that made a water landing, sort of, near the end of a bay. Chris Newbert occupies the *Bilikiki* each November for his photo classes. Water was 83 degrees. There are wide angle opportunities and macro to include many small fish and nudibranchs. I didn’t realize how small baby nudibranchs can be or that there is a different commensal shrimp for nearly everything, from sea cucumbers to the Hellfire anemone. Nearly everyone in our group of 17 had a camera, and some were into eyeball shots of parasites on parasites. There were three digital shooters. “Didja see the ...!” was replaced with “I downloaded the chip and made a file for fish and a file for invertebrates. I got 124 images. Here’s one on the laptop.” Times are a-changin’. Islands visited include Mary Island, the New Georgia group (especially Maravo Lagoon), the Russells, and the Florida Islands. Some war wreckage can be dived, but all the major ship battles of Savo Island, Iron Bottom Sound, and “The Slot” were too deep for diving. We had several dives of more than an hour on our A1 80s at 3000 psi. **(Ph: 800-663-5363 (US) or 250 383-7253 (Canada); e-mail bilikiki@horizon.bc.ca; website www.bilikiki.com or www.infobilikiki.com)**

***Bilikiki*, June 2002, Bill Kimball (waltgenlan@aol.com) Phoenix, AZ.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. We had a fun group and the crew and dive masters easily flowed into it’s rhythm. Five dives a day with one “real night dive” after dinner at 8 p.m. The most luxurious boat for space that I’ve been on. We encountered one exotic subject after another with camouflage and stealth the order of the day for both offensive and defensive survival. Monty and Michelle pointed out creatures that you hadn’t even recognized as creatures. With my digital set up I could download and view 150 shots after each dive. I have never had subjects that were so willing to be recorded. Attentive crew, plenty to eat, smooth ride, innumerable rinse tanks and services (laundered everyone’s skins/wet suits halfway through the trip). When the 24-hour flu passed around the ship I saw a display of prescription antihistamines, cold medications and antibiotics that would have rivaled any pharmaceutical company at a convention. These divers really traveled prepared. Someone was even thoughtful enough to bring an inflatable love doll that we all enjoyed. Huge areas for photographers including a separate photo room upstairs with a dozen spots to recharge everything you could imagine. Light table, slide processing and information so helpful that bordered on instruction/education. Monty repaired flooded housings, lent lenses to replace ones that went out of commission and would have given

you the shirt off his back — but most of the guys and one woman wore none.

***Bilikiki*, June 2002, Bill & Ruth Maki (Bill.Maki@ttu.edu) Lubbock, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm no currents. 11 day trip through the Florida and Russell Islands, Mary Island, and Marovo lagoon. Bright sun, flat seas, warm water, and good visibility. They promised us photographs of fifteen species we'd not seen — we got sixteen! Many sites have wonderful pristine hard corals, colorful soft corals, and huge sea fans. Standout dive sites included: Mary Island, with schools of jacks and barracuda relatively unfazed by proximity of divers; White Beach, with various gobies and their symbiotic shrimp; Velvia Reef, with an excellent assortment of macro subjects (nudibranchs, anemone/clown fish); Rainbow Reef, for its cuttlefish (some mating); and Totalave Island at Marovo Lagoon, with a huge school (200+) of large bumphead parrot fish. The *Bilikiki* is one of the best live-aboard operations going. Monty and Michelle, the managers, were great and the service from the crew was exemplary. Spacious indoor and outdoor camera tables and rinse tanks.

***Bilikiki*, July 2002, Jerry Loveless (JerryL3515@aol.com) Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Good. Great crew, wonderful

boat, great diving, great accommodations, and cooperative underwater critters. Couldn't have been better. At eleven nights, the trip was much too short. Could have spent a month there. Photography; with chargers, and supplies if needed. E-6 processing. Monty helpful with anything needed. Michelle, Monty and crew did a fabulous job. *Bilikiki* and her sister ship *Spirit of the Solomons* are unique in their wonderful, attentive service.

***Bilikiki*, July 2002, Richard Pizitz, Birmingham, AL.** Vis: 15-80 ft. Water 80-82 F. Dives accrued: 1000+. The trip was disappointing and I rank it ninth or tenth of our Pacific trips. The boat was comfortable and spacious, the food was good, and the Solomon Islander crew members were excellent. However, the diving was well below expectations. On our eleven day trips we had only seven dives that I would rate very good. The other dives were either affected by low visibility or lack of marine life. It was surprising to me that with so many sites in the Solomons, we dived many dead walls and reefs. We dove several poor sites more than once. On at least two occasions, several divers swam for distances to find live coral and good marine life, after they had dropped us on a dead site. Also, we saw almost no large fish, rays, or turtles. The steering went out on the boat for two days. The last day we had no dives at all and were ignominiously towed back to port for seven hours. The divemaster told one guest that we did not visit four or five of the best dive sites. Whether this was due

to the steering problem or lack of effort was not clear. Upon returning home, we asked the *Bilikiki* for an appropriate refund based on the steering failure effectively ruining two of the days, and on a \$3,000 trip they offered the insultingly low refund of \$105. Only one dive master accompanied the divers on each dive. We only had nine divers, but were told with a full boat of twenty divers, they still only send one divemaster down. This is not the policy of most first rate live-aboards. Also, *Bilikiki* Cruised made a reservation for us at the somewhat run down Mendana Hotel for \$100 a night. The Mendana has a posted rate of \$100 US (which is apparently for the benefit of *Bilikiki* Cruises and similar operations), while identical room is available in Solomon dollars at a posted rate that works out to \$69 US. It is a small amount of money, but there's no point in being taken advantage of. Needless to say, our overall experience was less than favorable.

***Spirit of the Solomons, October 2001, Jerry Loveless***  
**(JerryL3515@aol.com) Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Flew to Fiji and then on to Honiara, where we met the boat in the wee hours of the morning. We were underway shortly thereafter and cruised for sixteen wonderful days through the thousands of islands. Evidence of WWII was frequent and we did many dives on shipwrecks and other equipment abandoned by U.S. troops at the war's end. The *Spirit of*

*the Solomons* while not the newest nor the most luxurious live-aboard, is a fine operation. Capt. Jim Light and First Mate Kay, the ship ran like clockwork. There was such a 'Spirit' of teamwork among the crew. The tender drivers were incredible. They worked in teams and always seemed right on top of you when you surfaced. Helpful and courteous they made every dive delightful. But much credit also needs to go to the cook, the engineers, the housekeeping crew and the boat captains. The coral throughout the Solomons is recovering from El Niño and the fish life is abundant. The weather was wonderful. We took all meals topside under the canvas cover. The seas were calm and we enjoyed the nights with the gentle rocking. The diving was varied and interesting as we saw many islands. It is recommended for both experience and those with fewer dives. Divemasters were available but not pushy and we were free to dive the profiles we wished. No decompression diving permitted. We made several tours to islands and met some wonderful people. The natives were receptive and we enjoyed trading with them for their wonderful wood carvings. Although there have been some problems in Honiara due to local disputes and erratic air service, it's still wonderful diving and worth the effort to get there. **(Ph: 800-663-5363 (US) or 250 383-7253 (Canada); fax 250 383-6598 (Canada); e-mail bilikiki@horizon.bc.ca; website www.bilikiki.com or www.infobilikiki.com)**