

others look like barren deserts. The corals are beginning to come back. The water is incredibly clear and blue. Dolphin Pacific Divers is a solid well run operation. They are very safety conscious, friendly and definitely enjoy diving. They probably should skip some of the more heavily damaged dive sites. Swimming with humpback whales was a once in a life time experience. Whale Swim Adventures is an exceptionally well run operation. They are very professional and know everything there is to know about the whales. We had a number of encounters snorkeling with Moms and their calves, and frisky males looking for a mate. They are such magnificent creatures, gliding through the blue depths of Tonga. In addition, we saw many whales from the boat, breaching and playing, just being whales. There are long periods where there are no whales to be seen, but it is an absolutely life changing experience when you get the chance to be in the water with these magnificent giants. The Tongan Beach Resort was very nice. The food was good, the accommodations were right on the beach, and the staff was very friendly. We sometimes could see whales breaching from the beach. You can see falling stars at night. This is definitely paradise.  
([www.tonga.islands-resorts.com](http://www.tonga.islands-resorts.com))

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## Central & Western Pacific Live-Aboards

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### AUSTRALIA

*Quicksilver, June 2003, Jerry*

**Hamberg (dhamberg@remc7.k12.mi.us), Holland, MI.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 77 F, calm. The Coral Sea can stay rough for long periods of time, but we hit it right on our trip, and it was quite calm; we even had mirror-smooth water a couple of days. I wasn't ready to hear that a dive guide would be with us on all dives, but it turned out okay; there were a couple of times that there was current, and we were 100+ miles off shore. You wanted to have more than just your buddy near during those dives. We had one dive that a large silver tip shark patrolled near us; they can be aggressive and at that point it was good to have more than just your buddy. We had the possibility of having 12 divers on the trip; we had six: three single guys, one single gal, and my wife and I. Five crew, most smoked, but not near the divers or inside of the boat. Took the boat from 5 p.m. until 6 a.m. the next day to get to Osprey Reef, and it was worth it; there are not many boats that go this far, and we didn't see any. The coral was in great shape; the big clams were beautiful, and the species of fish was high. We went on to Shark Reef eight miles south of Osprey which is seldom visited; it was really full of fish, a thousand blue and yellow fusiliers going in one direction while a stream of hundreds of black — one with blue neon stripes — swam in the opposite direction. There were schools of Moorish idols and pale blue surgeon fish. I saw fire gobies, blennies, and stonefish. The table corals and soft corals look healthy, there were white tip sharks, gray whaler sharks, and silver tip. As the boat moved closer to the

upper Ribbons by Lizard Island, we also were treated to snorkeling with Minke whales. The reefs near Lizard Island were in great shape, many hard corals, clams, big blue sea stars, sleeping white tips, big potato groupers in the 300 hundred pound range. The night dives were great as well; the reefs were full of feather stars and crinoids of many different colors, and there were many anemones and clown fish. This was the best diving that we've ever seen. On one dive at Steve's Bommie, I had a Minke whale swim underneath me as I went back to the dive boat — wow. The crew was accommodating to helping with camera; the facilities on the boat consisted of one bucket at the back of the boat for cameras only, no table.  
([www.quicksilverdive.com.au](http://www.quicksilverdive.com.au))

***Spirit of Freedom, Tusa Dive, March-April 2003, Gyal and Elizabeth Starr, San Jose, CA.*** We have logged over 200 dives each. Weather — mostly sunny. Barrier Reef — choppy. Coral Sea — calm and flat. Water Vis: 50 to 100+ feet. Temp. — 79 degrees. You can dive your own profile. Diving Restrictions — No reverse profile. This is a large comfortable boat. The staff is fun loving, capable, and organized. Rooms are good size. Ours was the “deluxe,” and it really was deluxe! En Suite, TV, CD/DVD, large windows, comfortable oversize double bed, etc. Large, comfortable lounge area to relax 24/7. Large dining area. Meals or snacks served 5 times a day. Wine at dinner. Organized dive deck with large platform to allow easy entry and return. Nitrox is on board for an additional charge. Everything about this vessel

and crew was first class. It is also a real bargain compared to live-aboards in other areas. Dive sites were well planned and presented. Good briefings allowed all levels of divers to make the most of their skills. Coral Sea was absolutely spectacular. We dove Osprey Reef for three days of the seven-day trip. Nothing special needed to be done to prep for this trip. Just pack your usual dive gear, toiletries, and casual clothes. They had ginger pills to help those who suffered sea sickness. They rent cameras and other gear if desired.  
([www.spiritoffreedom.com.au](http://www.spiritoffreedom.com.au))

***Spoilsport, September 2002, Julia Harrison (julidive@rcsis.com), Roseville, CA.*** Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 71-76 F. Dives logged: 1,500. Water was colder than expected, lower biodiversity than expected. Shared bathroom was a pain — kept getting locked out by the other cabin.  
([www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com))

***Spoilsport, May 2003, Richard J. Troberman (tmanlaw@aol.com), Seattle, WA.*** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, choppy, surge. Mike Ball Dive Expeditions (*Spoilsport*) is a first class dive operation. The crew did everything possible to accommodate the divers and to meet every need. The service was superb. Surprisingly, however, the dives were not led by a dive-master. Once the boat arrived at a dive site, a crew member usually went into the water to check currents and other conditions. This was followed by a thorough dive briefing. The dive deck

was then open for diving for a specified length of time, and you could do as many dives in that time as your computer would allow, depending on depth and bottom time. This was an efficient and enjoyable way of diving, and though there were 26 divers on board, there was plenty of space to accommodate everyone, and everyone managed to keep out of everybody else's way. A guide was available if requested. Divers were asked not to go below 130 feet, to do two safety stops (30 feet for two minutes and 15 feet for three to five minutes), and to return with 500 psi. There is a hanging bar at 15 feet and two lines at 30 feet. The week before my trip, the weather was bad, and the boat was unable to dive the wreck of the *S.S. Yongala*.

Consequently, we went there first to make sure we could dive the wreck. The *Yongala* (300 feet plus) sank in a cyclone in 1911 and is a world-class wreck dive. It rests on its side at 90 feet. No penetration is allowed (per Australian government). It is thoroughly covered with corals and resembles a reef dive. Because there is nothing else around for miles, it is thick with marine life of all shapes and sizes, including sea snakes and some groupers weighing over 500 pounds. At night, squadrons of marbled rays patrol the site, often covered by three or four smaller rays, stacked like pancakes. I saw up to 15 rays at a time. Other sites in the Coral Sea included bommies and walls, some with caves and swim-throughs. Many were frequented by spectacular lionfish and cuttlefish, as well as the usual array of reef fish. Unfortunately, there was evidence of

coral bleaching at several sites, but even at those sites the diving was enjoyable. The only disappointment was the lack of sharks. Saw only a few white tips, grays, and a few silvertips. On the other hand, Scuba Zoo (shark feed) was a bit hokey and way too long. Steve, the chef, did a fantastic job preparing meals. The food was excellent and plentiful.

***Super Sport, October 2002, Wayne Leonard (aquamansf@aol.com), San Francisco, CA.*** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 feet. Water: calm. This was a 3.5-day trip — on the way from Cairns to Lizard Island. Managed 11 dives during the trip, the max offered. The trip was about 2x the price of the next operator but was well worth it. There are only a few cabins with private bathrooms, so be sure to request one of those if available. Our cabin was relatively spacious. Service and food on board was excellent. Crew was top notch, and a fairly high ratio of crew: to guests. I had a number of great dives. Tons of fish life including lion fish, sea snakes, big cuttlefish. One highlight is the Cod Hole, where a divemaster hand feeds dozens of giant (5-foot!) potato cods. Quite intimidating! Until we reached the Cod Hole (the last two dives of the trip), we never saw another boat on the reef. ([www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com))

## Fiji

***Fiji Aggressor, April 2003, Don Hoft, Holliston, MA.*** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 35 to 75 feet. Water: calm, choppy, currents, no cur-