

Decameron Hotels. There were beach activities that really got hopping when a planeload of Italians landed. We gave the Marazul a strong 3.5 stars (out of 5). The food selection is good, varied, and plentiful — you will not go hungry! Service in the dinning room is fast and helpful. The beer is delicious. The mixed drinks varied, as every bartender seemed to mix them differently. We had to ask them to turn the volume down at the beach bar on more than one occasion so we could talk, but generally it was a nice place to sit and watch the sea after a leisurely dinner. They also pass out free cigarettes — no thank you. The (second) room we had was large, bright, and cheery. It was well maintained. There are TVs in the rooms. We were told that wealthy Colombians like to send their kids to the Decameron Aquarium just before Christmas as a graduation or end-of-the-school year present. Sure enough the place was full of older teenagers. (I wonder if some of the mothers knew that their daughters were topless and wearing thongs?)
(www.buzosdelcaribe.com)

COSTA RICA

Costa Rica is famous among experienced divers for uninhabited Cocos Island, three hundred miles offshore. Here are 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 Nino 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 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.

Agua Rica, Cala Luna, November 2002, Martin Raffauf (mraffauf@us.ibm.com), San Carlos, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, choppy, surge, currents. Agua Rica is located in Tamarindo on Pacific coast. Dives only at Santa Catalina Islands (which is good). The marine life there is prolific — lots of sharks, rays, eels, tons of fish, large schools, wahoo, tuna, etc. Occasional whale sharks, although November is not the time (usually in spring). The Santa Catalinas are one of

the better sites on Pacific side of Costa Rica. Agua Rica is run by two expat Italians, Claudio and Toni, who do a decent job. They do all the diving at Catalinas, which is good. Their boats were both out for repair when we were there, and they were using smaller, rented boats, which were bad. Boats were too small for the sea conditions, resulting in rough rides, and one of them broke down on two successive days. However, as compensation, they gave us a discount and free T-shirts. The boat ride from Tamarindo is about 45 minutes, as opposed to 1.5 hours from Playa Coco and Hermosa. However, you can reach Bat Islands from Hermosa, but it's too far for a day trip from Tamarindo. Costa Rica diving Pacific side is for more experienced. The boat rides, current, surge, etc., can be rough. Visibility varies dependent on rains and runoff. Lots of runoff, limited vis, but lots of plankton, so many fish. Pelagics on every dive — sharks on every dive along with eels, other pelagic fish. Large schools of fish. Forget the inshore sites, just go to Catalinas or Bat Islands further north. There are no docks at Tamarindo, so boat boarding is via small skiff on beach, with transfer to larger boat. Tamarindo accommodations range from basic to excellent. Cala Luna resort is excellent. Clean, nice rooms, excellent food, good service. The attitude of the concierge there is yes, whatever you want — yes. They are helpful with info and will organize anything you wish. Costa Rica has a lot of other attractions other than diving. Jungle canopy tour at Tamarindo was excellent, as was the Tabacon Hot springs at the Live Arenal volcano.

Driving in Costa Rica is best described as “an adventure.” There are now direct flights on Delta to Liberia in the north — otherwise you are in for a four- to five-hour drive from San Jose on two lane roads with lots of trucks and traffic. UW Photography Comments: Not really setup for U/W photogs at all. Boats small, ride to sites is usually rough (at this time of year), vis is low (at this time of year) — however fish life is huge. (www.tamarindo.com/agua, www.calaluna.com)

Bill Beard's Dive Safari, February 2003, C.F. Ward, San Diego, CA.

Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 6 to 20 feet in pond scum, thus only four dives. Water: 70 to 75 F. Puffer fish in large numbers, three large rays, two scorpion fish. Tougher group did two more dives further off the coast, somewhat better viz. Four dive sites I saw were just lumps of rocks with occasional swift currents. The second dive site per day is selected for proximity not interest. Slow boat to the sites just out of, or in, the Bay of Popagayo. Crew member who set up my gear was clueless, misrigged the BC and when the reg leaked, was told “need an O ring” by another crew member, so he handed me the reg back and repeated “need an O ring.” Did not see him again after the first trip. First dive, divemaster lost a diver for 20 minutes on the surface, post dive (we had to tell him one was missing), then we motored about looking for him until we saw him in another surface group 100 yards away. Post dive, board the boat via a 2-foot (tough first step) ski-boat ladder, three round rungs that hurt

the feet when climbing out with a weight-integrated BC — which you do because the crew takes weight belts and ignores the BC, unless you make a big deal out of it. They have a faster boat that takes you back, after trading all the dive gear between boats at sea, that oddly enough has a proper dive ladder, so they know the difference obviously. One diver ran out of air early in a dive, which is only significant because it was the divemaster, who reported that she must have taken her dad's rig that did not match her hoseless computer in some fashion. I heard another diver hum the musical theme from "Gilligan's Island," which says it all. Pick another season and another dive shop.

(www.diving-safaris.com)

Deep Blue Diving Adventures, Ocotal Diving, Ocotal Resort, Playas del Coco, May 2003, Harley Piltingsrud, Cincinnati, OH. Best diving in the area was at Bat Island, northwest of Coco Beach and Catalina Island, southwest of Coco Beach. Reports of divers going to Bat Island that week were "don't bother," so I limited my diving trips to Catalina. Deep Blue Diving Adventures and Ocotal Diving use similar boats for their trips to Catalina Island, 30- to 35-foot inboards with sun canopies and marine heads. Cruising at about 17 knots, the trip takes about one hour. Both operations offered free pick-up and drop-off services to my Coco Beach hotel and set up gear and cleaned it after the day's diving. Deep Blue charged \$75 for the two-tank trip, and Ocotal, \$85. Deep Blue is an operation owned by Terry

and Billy. They are both from the U.S. Divemasters were very attentive and safety conscious. They serve a lunch during the surface interval. On our Monday trip, visibility was approximately 30 feet, temp. 81 F. Constant mixed currents of cold and warm water were typical on all three trips. We were lucky to see a fine manta, with 12- to 14-foot wingspan as well as golden and eagle rays, and schools of barracuda. On Tuesday and Friday, I dove with Ocotal Divers. Divemasters were very attentive, paying particular attention to everyone fully timing out at safety stops. The Tuesday trip was fine, with a sighting of a manta, and numerous white tipped sharks. Friday's trip was not as good, with strong unpredictable currents and less critters. General diving safety in this location is particularly important, as the nearest recompression chamber was in Panama, just south of Costa Rica. Hotel La Puerta del Sol was built five to 10 years ago by the owner-managers from Italy. They were very pleasant and helpful, and the room (\$40 to \$50 per night) was just fine, with satellite TV and excellent air conditioning (could dry diving gear overnight). The Italian restaurant on the premises was very good. Local restaurants had super seafood, as Coco Beach is a commercial fishing center. Owners of the fishing and fish processing operations (brothers that had moved to Coco Beach from Louisiana about 35 years ago) also own restaurants (Louisiana Grill and Papagayo Sea Food) that served out-of-this-world catch-of-the-day seafood meals. I ran into one of the owners, Rusty Bragg, as he was

tending shop at one of his businesses, R&R Tours. He took me to one of the several "canopy tours," Witches Rock, north of Coco Beach. This was the largest one in Costa Rica. It consisted of cables strung among treetops that you traveled along while strapped to a pulley riding on the cable. It was fun, but not much wild life. On Thursday, Rusty drove me up to the Arenal Volcano in the Coter Rain Forest Reserve area. A bit of Alpine atmosphere. Rusty also had a boat building operation in Coco Beach that built many of the commercial fishing and diving boats in the area. I stayed at Ocotol Resort two nights. They were about \$100/night. Very nice, but the air conditioning was more common, cool but high humidity, making drying of gear a slow process. They supplied only slightly warm water.

(www.scubadivingincostarica.com,
www.ocotalresort.com,
www.lapuertadelosol.com)

Diving Safaris, Sol Playa Hermosa, July 2002, Brian Bolton

(Mega1Gator@cfl.rr.com), **Winter Springs, FL.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water, calm. Nitrox was promised but was unavailable. Lame excuse was given. Night dives and trip to Bat Islands was unavailable with another set of lame excuses. Son, 14 years old with 50 dives, not allowed to dive the Catalina Islands; he has, as explained, done walls in the Caymans, drifts in Florida, still they would not allow it. Prior limitation not stated. Dive staff, however, good and accommodating. Great guides. Accommodations OK, Sol

Playa Hermosa Hotel has some plumbing problems, fixtures, and drains need work. Food on Sol Playa Hermosa, beachfront places, Aqua Sport, El Velero Hotel, very good. Heard good things about El Ocotol diving operation. (<http://arenasolplayahermosahotel.com>)

El Ocotol Resort, April 2003, Kendall Botellio (info@scubaspecialties.com), Phoenix, AZ.

Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F. Dive restrictions enforced: computer. Wow — do it all in Costa Rica! Diving is great, mantas, schools of jacks, turtles, seahorses, and five orca!! Buena Vista canopy tour is excellent! Do the long tour! Arenal volcano and Paraiso Hotel were awesome too! Beautiful country! (www.ocotalresort.com)

El Ocotol Beach Resort, May 2003, Arthur Graf (art9323@aol.com), San Antonio, TX.

Dives logged: 500+. Vis: 10 to 30 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, 75 F thermocline. I have just finished reading the June 2003

Undercurrent. The dive staff was very friendly and efficient. The divemaster checked the divers on the surface after the dive and was first aboard, where he handled the handups, and the boat captain assisted the divers coming aboard. The procedure was the usual, hand up the weights, make certain our BC had enough air to float, spin out of the BC, and hand it up. Swim to the ladder and remove the fins and hand them to the captain and climb aboard. I cannot see anyone spinning out of a BC (integrated or not) without having enough air in the BC to float it. You had the option of

either going with the divemaster or buddy up. Since the object at Bat Island was to see the bull sharks, and the divemaster knew where they were, we went with the divemaster. The briefings were very good, and if you followed them you had a reasonable dive.

El Ocotol Dive Resort, July 2003, Brian (Megaligator@cfl.rr.com), Winter Springs, FL. Experience:

101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, calm. The diving was great, lots of big critters, sharks, turtles, etc. Also, good macro opportunities including sea horses, harlequin shrimp, nudibranch, slugs, etc. The food at El Ocotol was excellent. The operation was safe and organized. All requests, including a night dive and Nitrox, were met. Not so last year with Diving Safaris/Bill Beards and El Ocotol Dive Resort far out performed Diving Safaris/Playa Hermosa. At El Ocotol, one boat had a bit of an exhaust smell. The boats (3) were safe, fast and gave a good ride. The crew made sure we stayed hydrated and kept all divers together, nobody was lost. A variety of fruit, cookies, cold drinks were available and plentiful. We stayed in the older rooms on the beach. They are in good shape, close to the pool and dive shop. There is a real feeling of community in this dive resort and we spent much time talking to other Americans who were there diving, made new friends.

El Ocotol Beach Resort, September 2003, A. Segal, Hixson, TN.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 40 feet. Water: 72 to 80 F, choppy,

surge. Very intimate hotel. Great service everywhere. Most rooms are in buildings spaced on hillside. Some beach-front rooms. The top rooms have spectacular view. Very long walk. A shuttle takes people from beach to their rooms. Swim up bar on beach and some buildings have their own small pools. Only rained twice in the evening, otherwise perfect weather. Basic, pretty and clean rooms. Gorgeous setting. Fantastic dive shop. Never had to touch equipment if didn't want to. Always had plenty of water, snacks, fresh fruit. Very good briefings and overview of boat layout. Several sharks (bull and white tip), a few large rays, huge variety of eels; dolphins and many turtles on the surface during boat rides. Backward roll off boat and a line off the bow to go down. A bit of current, a lot of surge. I was told by other divers that I would need a heavy wetsuit (5mm), but I felt my 5mm shorty was too much. Others used 3mm. There were thermoclines but nothing that lasted long or was terribly uncomfortable. The dives at Bat Island and Catalina were a little more rigid as they are more difficult dives. On one dive my dive buddy and I got separated from the group — which is easy considering the vis. Although we were not lost, we were headed back in the correct direction, they did send a divemaster to get us. I apologized immediately if we worried anyone or if we held up the group. He said glad we were having a good time and not to worry. No chastising, no condemning, no glares, no yelling or demeaning tactics. Everyone was treated as responsible divers. Almost everyone on boat was experienced. Could go on forever regarding

the country. Beautiful! A lot to do in CR other than diving! Maybe not the most beautiful dives (i.e., coral) but exciting.

El Ocotal Resort, September 2003, Carl Scott (cdscott@swbell.net), Spring, TX. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, surge. The restaurant is consistently good, and the rooms clean and well-maintained. However, service was not as good as I experienced 2 years ago (the staff is highly unresponsive, though polite). The dive staff remains well-organized and competent. Boats are adequate for small groups, but may be crowded in busier months. Dive staff not permitted to allow divers to finish tanks within no-deco limits, if doing so would result in the boat failing to return to shore by 1 PM. Negotiating with dive shop manager gave some leeway, but not much. Marine life is abundant, with multiple 6-foot white tips on most dives, though enormous schools of pelagic fish were absent during this visit (reports are they haven't stopped frequenting the area — it just wasn't my week). Saw many morays of different species at most sites, puffers were plentiful, king and Cortez angels were on nearly every dive (brightly colored juveniles, as well). Some species, such as frogfish and seahorses are being kidnapped and sold to aquarium wholesalers, so these are hard to find. September is mating season for turtles, so many pairs were spotted at the surface between dives. Whales (probably humpbacks) and porpoise could be heard in the water, but few were seen. Vis was good (60+ feet) the first 2 days, but gradually declined to about 20 feet on

the last day. The Catalina Islands is worth the supplement, but Punta Gorda was my favorite site — the only one with much coral and a nice population of reef fish to keep you company on the safety stop. This is not a place for “scenic diving,” as there are few reefs and vis can be low. However, marine life is abundant and different from any other place I've been. Although the restaurant is wonderful, it costs 2-3 times what the restaurants in town charge. Get out to the town of Coco for meals. There is a free bus to town several times each day, or a taxi can be had for about \$3.75 each way. My favorites were Matapalo (but don't stay after dark), Milanés, and Guajira (on the beach). For transportation to this area from San José, take a taxi. It's cheaper (costs around \$100 each way) than what the travel agents will try to sell you (up to \$400 round trip), and just as good. Trip is 4 hours minimum, depending on mountain traffic and how long you stop for lunch. Bus service is dirt cheap, but you'll need someone local to assist you with this option. There was a rinse bucket on the boat only 1 day. Otherwise, there is no safe place for camera storage aboard the boat. Dive staff inconsistent with respect to consideration of photographers both in and out of the water.

MEXICO (WESTERN)

The seamounts of the Sea of Cortez have schooling hammerheads, though not always seen, and plenty of sea lions. ... Socorro has hammerheads, although it's a long ride and there's no guaran-