

experience in the Queen Charlotte Islands; at least 15 females checked us out for over 20 minutes, up close and personal. The Port Hardy area is beautiful! We were fortunate to be able to dive with four knowledgeable people from the Vancouver Aquarium. Mike Lever has updated the staterooms and common areas to make them even more comfortable. He and Mary Anne continue to make this a premier live-aboard in the world in an area that above and below the water is one of the most beautiful in the world. Most of the 23 divers had a camera, so the camera area was crowded.

COSTA RICA

***Okeanos Aggressor*, May 2003, Steve Wenc, Laporte, IN.** Vis 50 to 100. Temp 73-83 F. Dives: 251-500. Depth limits determined by your nitrox mix and risk level. Nitrox is a must at Cocos and the course can be taken during the 36 hr. passage. I dived with an air computer as a backup and it went into deco several times. Five dives a day with the first four about 100 ft. Dive your computer, no assigned buddies, come up whenever and wherever you want and they pick you up. Safety sausage required and provided. Currents were challenging at times, and the thermoclines down deep were invigorating. The amount of marine life is just incredible. Dozens of whitetips on every dive, scattered hammerheads, abundant marble rays, several eagle rays, a couple mantas and a few turtles. There were massive schools of fish to support all these predators and plankton for the rest, to the detriment of visibility. You

would have to do a night dive at “shark rodeo” to believe it. Hundreds of whitetips prowling all around you. The bottom was mostly volcanic rock with little coral. Bring your gloves. The *Okeanos* was old but seaworthy, no small consideration given the distance traveled. The food was OK. The dive staff left a lot to be desired. After handing me my camera and allowing me to descend to 100 ft. my divemaster fired up the Zodiac and zipped out of sight. I took a compass bearing, beat feet, and was lucky enough to rejoin the group. No explanation but I suspect he blew the location and didn’t catch his error until I was already down. The next day I came within arms reach of the propellers when the driver squared up the boat in 6 ft. swells without checking my position. Our divemaster sat out a night dive without telling us (regulator problems). He also missed the next morning’s dive when he forgot his gear and didn’t want to go back and get it. The kitchen plumbing leaked through the ceiling and onto our bunks and they refused to fix it until we got back to port. We didn’t have a last night party, as is the custom, and we never once set foot on the island as promised. We did see the park rangers when they came on board to collect the \$35 per diver per day park fee (\$210). Those that didn’t read the fine print were surprised. Cocos Island is worth the time, money, and inconvenience of getting there. I’m not sure this was the best way to experience it. (www.aggressor.com)

***Sea Hunter*, March/April 2003, Harry A. Kreigh, Sacramento, CA.** 15-day trip (11 diving days) to Malpelo

and Cocos Island from Puntarenas (cruised approximately 1,000 miles). Generally smooth crossings. 18 passengers (mixed group of Europeans and Americans). Buffet-style meals with a varied menu and plenty of food. Outstanding facilities and dive operation — one of the best live-aboards anywhere. Lots of hammerheads at one site in Malpelo and fewer shark encounters in Cocos (best hammerhead action at Alcyone, almost none at other sites). Rough conditions forced an early departure from Malpelo (dove three of five scheduled days), but dove additional days at Cocos. Due to the limited hammerhead activity, the diving was unremarkable. My overall ratings for this dive trip are 2.0 (scale of 1 [worst] to 5 [best]) for Malpelo and 3.0 for Cocos based on previous Eastern Pacific trips. On my first trip to Cocos (July 1997, during El Nino), I observed many more hammerheads at several sites. Weather/water conditions: sunny to partly cloudy with occasional showers (80 to 85 F and generally light winds (0 to 10 mph). Malpelo: light or choppy seas with some large ocean waves (5 to 8 feet), moderate current and surge; water temperature: 83 (surface) to 65 (below thermocline at 70 feet); 30 to 50 feet visibility. Cocos: calm to light choppy seas with slight current; water temperature, 83 (surface) to 75 to 78 (below thermocline at 90 feet); 50 to 100-plus feet visibility. A 3 to 5 mm wetsuit with hood was adequate for these conditions. Definitely destinations for experienced divers only. Dives were generally scheduled at 8:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., and 3:00 p.m. daily. Night dives were offered at

Cocos only. Nitrox (32 and 36%) was available at extra cost (\$188 for the trip). All dives were led by experienced divemasters and preceded by detailed briefings. Diving was done from two fiberglass pangas (about 20 feet in length) and all sites were 5 to 20 minutes from the *Sea Hunter* moorings. Diving gear and tanks were stored on the pangas. Aluminum tanks were consistently filled to 3,000 psi. A fresh water shower and towels were provided on the dive deck. A semi-closed rebreather course was held during the trip. Malpelo: >50 hammerheads on one dive at The Fridge. Large population of green morays — seen free swimming and crawling among the rocks everywhere. Impressive schools of jacks, snappers, and barracuda. Cocos: Generally good to excellent conditions at Alcyone, and multiple dives there produced the best (and closest) hammerhead encounters at cleaning stations; 10 to 20 sharks per dive. Snorkeled with bottlenose dolphins (3 to 5) between dives. Lots of marble rays and whitetip sharks on most dives. Frequently seen species: eagle rays, turtles, flounders, rainbow runners, creole, moorish idols, hawkfish, leather bass, barberfish and king angels. Infrequent/unusual sightings: Galapagos, blacktip and silvertip sharks; snowflake, tiger snake and zebra morays; jawfish, razorfish, mobula, rosy-lipped batfish, frogfish and mantis shrimp. Wahoo and yellowfin tuna were observed during several safety stops. Exciting night dives at Manuelita — large packs of white tip sharks (40 to 100) gathered and patrolled the reef, led by huge green

trevally. Hunting turned into a frenzy when sharks dove and battled for fish under ledges. Lots of continuous action. Comments/complaints: Malpelo: Serious thermocline below 70 feet (65 F or less!) and poor visibility at all depths. Small island with limited divesites and no protection from storms and rough seas. Underwater landscape is bleak and colorless with few macro subjects — unless large numbers of hammerheads are present on most dives; not worth the 40-hour boat ride. Cocos: Lack of current and deep thermocline (90 feet) produced few hammerheads at most sites. Night dives in Chatham and Wafer Bays were mediocre. Tourist information: I arrived at San Jose, CR, airport at night — it took 1-1/2 hours to complete immigration processing. Departure tax is \$17. I stayed at the Best Western-Irazu. Comfortable, reasonable rate, and close to airport, but some distance from downtown San Jose. On the return from Puntarenas, we stopped in Miramar for a canopy tour of the dry forest at Vista Golfo. Slid down steel cables at tree top level in the hills above the bay with a good view of the valley. A fun ride but no wild animal encounters (monkeys, toucans, etc.) as advertised. (www.underseahunter.com)

Sea Hunter, April 2003, Tom Wilson, Hanover, NH. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 69-82 F. Dives logged: 1,200 over 30 years. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limits given, most used nitrox. Went to Malpelo Island as well as Cocos. That gave us two remote and exciting islands at once. In San Jose we stayed in a comfortable old-style hotel,

the Grano de Oro. The next morning we joined the rest of the divers for a bus ride down to the Pacific port of Puntarenas. We boarded *Sea Hunter*, a 115-foot dive boat that was our home for the next 12 days. We left at noon for the 410-mile passage SE to Malpelo Island. After four days of diving there, we went west 340 miles to Cocos Island. We dove there for four days, and finally went 300 miles NNE back to Puntarenas. Altogether we traveled over 1,000 miles. Each leg took at least two nights and a day. The *Sea Hunter* is a class act. It is well laid out, with lots of space for dive gear and cameras. The cabins are comfortable. The flush toilets work well. There is plenty of fresh water. The lounge and dining areas are spacious. The food is good and more than adequate in quantity. We had fresh fruit and salads. The dive masters and crew were excellent. All our diving was from two sizeable skiffs, called pangas. Cocos and Malpelo are about 5 degrees north latitude, and the Galapagos Islands are to the southwest of them at the equator. All of these islands are of volcanic origin, but in appearance Malpelo and Cocos are quite a contrast. The former was originally much bigger, but over time much has eroded away. It is now 2 by 2 miles of mostly barren rock rising in sharp peaks of 800 to 900 feet. Only seabirds nest there. It is a forlorn and desolate place, but underwater the sea life is amazing. We found there were sometimes vigorous currents. Large waves roll across the Pacific, and these create surge underwater, especially in the upper 30 or 40 feet. Water temperature varied from 84 degrees near the surface to 61 degrees

when we were deep. We might go through two thermoclines on one dive, and the visibility might change from 30 feet to 100 feet as we moved through layers of water with different temperature. Coral growth is minimal. Underwater we had steep walls and boulder fields. Night dives were out of the question. We saw large schools of hammerhead sharks, sometimes below us, sometimes over our heads, and occasionally passing by fairly quickly. They have a mysterious and eerie quality to them. They are hard to approach for pictures. They don't seem to like diver's bubbles. We had lots of beautiful eagle rays. Once we had a squadron of about 20 pass nearby. One dive we descended right into a large school of 18-inch-long Jordan snappers that were tightly bunched. We swam around them and through them. It was impressively dark in the middle of that school. After one dive, we saw a hundred or more active boobies in one spot on the surface perhaps a half mile from the "bait ball," a big ring of small, sardine-like fish swimming around in a tight ball. Preying on them were hundreds of three-foot-long red snappers and five- to six-foot-long silky sharks. And there were the dolphins outside and the boobies above. It wasn't safe to go right in there, but we snorkeled about 30 yards from the bait ball. We had dolphins clicking and chirping near us and fast moving sharks below us. It was awesome. We arrived at Malpelo on Good Friday. We felt disconnected from the rest of the world. We had no word about what was going on in Iraq or any place else. We saw one fishing boat, but it steamed away when it saw us.

Malpelo belongs to Colombia. It is a marine sanctuary. There is not supposed to be any commercial fishing within nine miles of the island. There are 2 or 3 Colombian sailors stationed on Malpelo, but they don't have a boat. It took from the afternoon of the 21st to the morning of the 23rd to get to Cocos. The compass course was 286 degrees. That was our roughest passage. Cocos is lush and green. It is two by five miles with its highest peak almost 2,000 feet tall. The top gets a lot of rainfall, and there are beautiful waterfalls visible. The only inhabitants are a few Costa Rican coastguardsmen, some feral pigs and deer, and lots of birds: boobies, frigate birds, and tropicbirds. The diving is terrific. Three times we went to Alcyone sea mount (Named after Jacques Cousteau's boat). The top of this underwater mountain is at 85 feet, so the dives are short but spectacular. There we saw white-tip and hammerhead sharks and huge marble sting rays and schools of jacks and other fish above. Dives at Dirty Rock and Dos Amigos were similar. I did three night dives on the Chatham Bay side of Manuelita Island. Here the feature was watching over a hundred white-tip sharks foraging for small fish that were trying to hide under the boulders at 30 to 40 feet. Some large jacks came in and swam quickly about. Large groups of slower swimming sharks followed them, knowing that the jacks were better at detecting where the meals were. We stayed 5 feet above them, taking photos or videos. One afternoon a group of us went ashore and climbed up to and swam in a pool at the base of a 150-foot waterfall. It was a magi-

cal spot. Mostly we had some sunshine in the morning and clouds and occasional showers in the afternoon. The crossing back to Puntarenas was on the 26th. We were off the boat by 8 a.m. on the 28th. Most of our group went on a tour bus up into the mountains of western Costa Rica to a small resort above Miramar. There we did canopy cable rides through the tree tops or across a valley. The longest was 2,100 feet or about 3/8 of a mile. A small wheel is set on top of the 2-inch steel cable, and you are suspended below the wheel in a simple harness. We were going over 35 m.p.h. on the longest cable. It was thrilling and fun. We had lunch there and then rode the bus back to San Jose and our comfortable hotel. Roger, the captain of the *Sea Hunter*, is originally from Sweden. One dive master, Nico, lived in Italy and Croatia before moving to Mexico and then Costa Rica. The other dive master, Miguel, came from Spain. They all speak excellent English. The rest of the crew came from Costa Rica. Among the 17 divers there were only 5 Americans aboard. Peter is a pathologist from Phoenix. Steve is a lawyer living in Westchester County, N.Y. Bari, Steve's daughter, lives in Asheville, N.C. Mimi and I live in N.H. part time. We had four Germans: Babette, Lothar, Andreas, and Sylvia; an Austrian, Franz; a father and son from Italy, Franco and Mario; a Frenchman, Fabrice, who now lives in Mexico City. Nicole was originally from Germany. She works for the Olympics and lived in Utah for three years. Now she lives in Athens, Greece. We had a Chinese-American

lady, Vivian, who has master's degrees from Harvard and Princeton. She now lives in Grand Cayman and recently opened an upscale gift shop there. Owen, her husband of just two months, is an Englishman, who practices law in the Cayman Islands. And then there is Murat, who comes from Turkey, went to Robert College, then Hamilton College in upstate N.Y., and now lives in London, England. On the 29th we were up early and at the airport by 4:45 a.m. There were long lines to pay the \$26 departure tax and at the ticket counters and to go through security. Our 7:15 flight to Houston was 45 minutes late leaving San Jose. The pilot said they had to wait for a new flight plan because of stormy weather over the Gulf of Mexico. At Houston there were long lines for passports and customs, and we missed our connecting flight to Boston. They put us on one 2 hours later. The only seats left were in first class, but we managed to suffer through that. The last Dartmouth Coach out of Logan left at 8:45 p.m. and we made that with just a few minutes to spare. It was 11:30 when we got to Lebanon, where our car was waiting for us. It was after midnight when our heads hit the pillow. We must allow longer times to make connecting flights.

Sea Hunter, July 2003, Patrick Wikstrom (pwikstrom@

murphymedical.org), Warne, NC.

Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 30 to 90 feet. Water: 75 to 82 F, choppy, currents. Crouching in a semicircle in the sand, or clutching the boulder ridges

along the side walls of Alcyone, we watched hundreds of hammerheads pour down upon us. Wave after wave of hammers swam out of the distance over our group and then passed on, only to be repeated five or ten minutes later by another squadron. The site popped and flashed with the gleam of strobe lights as divers bagged close ups and silhouettes obtainable at just a few dive sites on the globe. Led by Bret Gilliam, of *Fathoms* magazine, our group of Drager dolphin divers was either previously certified or completed the training on the 36-hour crossing from Puntarenas to Cocos. Both the training and rebreather equipment onboard the *Sea Hunter* was first rate. Although the trip price was slightly more than the base price if booked directly from *Sea Hunter*, it included the training costs, rebreather rental, Nitrox, and rebreather supplies for the seven days of diving and turned out to be a bargain from my standpoint. The 120-ft-long *Sea Hunter*, which was recently completely refitted, is a stable, well-designed dive boat with a large salon, separate dining area, computer and video workroom, large sundeck (both covered and open), and a huge dive deck. Facilities for photographers were the best I've found on ten live-aboard trips. Cabins were clean, had private en-suite baths, ample storage space, but no individual air-conditioning controls. I shared a triple cabin and had sufficient personal space. Food was generally excellent, with copious quantities served with decorative flare. Decent Chilean wines were available at \$12 per bottle and beer was \$1.50 a can. No other booze was available.

With the exception of the Captain, who was a little bit aloof and didn't socialize much, the ship's crew was spectacular. The divemasters, Miguel and Mario, were friendly, helpful, and adept at finding neat stuff and doubled as videographers, producing a first class trip documentary. Cooks and kitchen staff were attentive and friendly, panga drivers were professional and proficient at tracking us down when we popped up all over the ocean, and the engineers and other crew were all sociable and helpful. The boat is equipped with redundant generators, compressors, a huge Nitrox bank, and modern electronics and diver safety equipment. Except for the first check-out dive, all diving was done from two hard bottomed pangas which broke the passengers up into two groups and went to the sites in an alternating pattern. We never had more than ten divers on any site. Entry was by backward roll and reentry was via sturdy metal ladders. Audible and visual surface signaling devices were mandatory, and supplied if necessary, along with personal radio locators whose antenna had a maddening propensity for falling off. Most dives were free-swimming gentle drifts, but big current sites like Alcyone were hooked first with divers descending and ascending the anchor line. Two morning, one afternoon, and night dives every other day were offered. Solo diving and moderate decompression diving was tacitly allowed although most divers stayed with their groups. Dive times lasted as long as 83 minutes with rebreathers, depths were governed by site configuration, oxygen issues, and decompres-

sion obligations. This is advanced diving, and divers were treated like the experienced adults we mostly were. Water averaged 80-82 degrees with colder thermoclines and currents in the mid 70s — visibility varied from 30 to 90 ft. The weather varied throughout each day from torrential downpours to beaming sunshine. The island is a beautiful, prehistoric-looking mountain rising from the sea with numerous waterfalls pouring out of the island's flanks and lush jungle growing down to the waters edge. The underwater biodiversity at Cocos was truly unbelievable. Huge schools of jacks and sardines whirled and swirled in and out of baitball configurations. Giant marble rays cruised the rocky outcrops, eagle rays skimmed the sandy bottoms, green turtles chomped on sponges, yellowfin tuna zoomed by, manta rays and dolphins joined our safety stops, and I logged seven species of sharks during my adventure. (Whitetip reef, blacktip reef, silkys, Galapagos, silvertips, hammers, and a whale shark). Sharks were truly everywhere with multiple species noted on every dive. Don't expect much colorful coral or spectacular macro. Best trip of my life!

Undersea Hunter, August 2003,
Nikki Mahan, Bellevue, WA.

Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, currents. My third and best trip to Cocos Island. The silver tips are back at Silverado, and we saw hammerheads on every dive. The white tips are a constant, hundreds of them. The night dive was amazing, with the white tips hunting. We saw two whale sharks, a 25 ft male

at Dirty Rock and a beautiful 18 ft female at Manuelita. They both hung around letting us snuggle and take photos until we had to leave for our safety stop. At Alcyon, a beautiful, mostly black, huge manta ray buzzed us and posed for photos as well. We saw many eagle rays in formation, also as many as 15 to 20 marble rays at a time, surrounding us as we watched them. Two large frog fish make their home at 100 feet at Viking Rock. On the trip back we had schools of pilot whales, dolphins on the bow, and a lonesome false killer whale joining our trip.
 (www.underseahunter.com)

ECUADOR

Galapagos Islands

Galapagos Aggressor, September 2002, Greg Regnier (gregnier. interact@rcn.com), Chicago, IL.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 65 feet. Water: 65 to 73 F, currents. Trip of a lifetime. The service was excellent, the food extraordinary, the crew attentive and anticipated our needs. There were great evening activities that included fish ID classes and an excellent star gazing lesson on equatorial and southern hemisphere skies. To say that the diving is strenuous is an understatement. To do this trip again I would be spending a lot more time in the gym getting in shape. Getting out of a panga is easy, getting back in when you're a little older and not in peak physical shape — well that's another story. The animals are fantastic. Getting up close and personal with both sea and land animals is amazing.