

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)

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-

rents. We were six divers (I was a solo), on the new *Aggressor II*, *Sere Ni Wai*. This is a nice boat, with an excellent crew. This was a really fine live-aboard experience. Compares well with the *Palau Aggressor*. Cabin was as good as you would want for a live-aboard. The boat was well maintained and clean. Not a single boat problem on the trip. The trip took us to Makogal and Nemeni islands. Out to the Vatu-I-Ra channel to E6 and Hi8 sites, Wakaya and Gau Islands. On Gau we visited Waikama Village for a fun, fulfilling experience. Worth giving up one night dive for! Fritz, the skipper has been in Fiji for over 20 years and is a good seaman who worked hard to find the best sites and conditions (not always easy). Sea life and corals on the islands were generally very good to excellent. The well known sites in Vatu-I-Ra channel, E6 and Hi8, I found were pretty dead of sea life but still interesting for the spectacular geography. Lots of sharks and fishes — great place for photography. White tip, gray reef, hammerheads (a few), leaf fish, blue ribbon eels to name a few interesting and regular sightings. Currents were sometimes strong but the briefings were good so there were no surprises. Sharks (and sea life) in Nigali channel on Gau were terrific (twice) in a strong incoming current. Super for photos. Rate the overall experience very good. Many really good sites/dives, the usual few mediocre sites. (www.aggressor.com)

***Fiji Aggressor*, April 2003, Juli Tracy, San Diego, CA.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet.

Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Our favorite live-aboard in 16 years of diving. The captain and crew were friendly and knowledgeable, and the dive sites were, for the most part, excellent. The corals, walls, and bommies were the most colorful we've seen, and the fish life was abundant. We shot a roll on each dive. Food was first-rate, and the accommodations (we had the owners' suite) were the nicest we've had (we also checked out the other rooms, and they were spacious, with everything on one level). Boat holds 10 divers, and we were lucky to have only six. Village tour on Thursday night was a highlight, as were three dives on E-6 and our private dive (my husband and I didn't want to repeat the shark dive, while the others did) on a reef where we saw a squadron of eagle rays and then three mantas! Camera table outside and another inside, though we usually used the dining room table to change film, etc. Good light and lots of space. Each room also had a desk space if desired. Charging capability at 120 V, so no adapter or converter needed. Excellent care by the staff of camera equipment.

***Fiji Aggressor*, September 2003, Jan Hendrix, Maui, HI.** The old *Sere Ni Wai*. We were part of a group that chartered the whole boat through Maui's Hawaiian Rafting Adventures. We loved the salon and the dining area. It was great to seat all of us at one big table. The salon had lots of sofas and chairs. The TV was tiny, so this limited how many people could watch a video or DVD; the DVD required a power converter that was needed by the crew in the evenings,

which sharply curtailed this activity. It did not have a proper camera table. Out of 10 guests, 6 had cameras. There was an adequate charging station, but we put cameras on the floor on towels in a corner of the salon. The cleaning/compressed air blow station was small, but workable. Setup space was generally the dining table. The covered stern deck above the dive platform had lots of space to lounge. The water in the big thermos jug there tasted like rubber/plastic. The boat was limited in its ability to provide Nitrox for 10 divers and the dive guides were unable to use Nitrox. There was only one whip for fills so many dives were delayed or off schedule. They did have a few full tanks they could have swapped out, but this was done once. The dive platform was fine, storage space was adequate. The freshwater shower was never warm for long. The crew was attentive. To dive from the skiff, they requested that we all roll off at once, causing several of us to get kicked or masks ripped off (the skiff is maybe a 15-ft vessel). Reentry you fling yourself over the edge (after handing the BC up to the crew) of the pontoon, hoping to find something to grip to pull yourself the rest of the way in. Several people got banged up by two large, protruding flanges on either side of the interior. Lounge in the bow — two lounge chairs there and a wooden deck for laying out. Cabins had a double berth with a single above it. Whether the bed was set higher than usual, or the safety siding was higher than usual, but I had to grip the sides of the bed and really leverage my way out of the bed. I like the little counter

with mirror, but the stool was missing. My bathroom appeared to not have been cleaned prior to our arrival. There was an empty shampoo bottle in the shower, along with shards of soap from last week's guests. The shower was slow to drain, and water leaked from the wall behind the toilet when the shower floor was full. I had a fantastic crop of mushrooms growing there. The captain seemed to be a relic of the "empire era," when being white and being captain means you order people around, blame others for any miscalculations and be officious and inflexible. This applied to everyone, including his guests. He grouched about the "huge" number of photographers, how they would slow the dive schedule down due to their endless fiddling with gear — a comment he rescinded at the end of the week. He called the Fijian crew his "boys" and only seemed to treat respectfully Snorre (say 'snowy'), a dive instructor from Norway. He mostly stayed above in the bridge or visited with us on the aft dive lounge. The safety briefing was off-putting. We were being lectured like children. He grouched about the corporate office ceaselessly — "Aggressor don't understand this" or "Aggressor never do that." The captain expected people to meet transport at a hotel across from the airport and the Aggressor documentation tells us we will be met at the airport. One couple were at the airport at the designated time, and were not found by the driver. When they contacted Fritz, he said, "well you missed the shuttle, you make your own way to the boat." They insisted that Aggressor live up to their

commitment and Fritz did acquiesce. Some guests had requested bottled water for the trip (on Aggressor's food preference sheet) and none had been provisioned. When they requested this Fritz said, "There's a store down the street." The dive guides, Joe, Moses and Snorre, were all great. Sam, the engineer, was also great and kept everything running well. Ram cooked up a storm every day. He is one of the better chefs on any live-aboard so far. Due to the late arrivals, the normal itinerary could not be followed. The organizers tried prior to the charter to communicate about the late arrival to develop a plan that would allow the rest of us to have a great trip, but he didn't work out a new schedule with our group leaders. We dove the same sites multiple times and dove average to downright bad sites for 2.5 days of the week. We aborted Gau wall 20 minutes into it because it was a lunar landscape. The dive guides said, "We keep telling the captain this is a bad dive, but he doesn't listen." Sunday, Gau Island where we dove Jim's alley as an afternoon and a night dive. Then overnight to Namena. Monday, we had super high voltage diving at North Save-a-Tack passage, Chimneys, Window of Dreams, and Black Forest. It was amazing diving, and I assumed that we'd go on to equal or better. Tuesday — E-6 and High 8. We dove E-6 3 times. Good, but not the high impact of North Save-a-Tack. We would have liked 5 dives here, as everyone wanted to do High 8 again, but were unable to do so due to slow tanks fills. Wednesday — Wakaya for 2 decent AM dives: Blue Ribbon eels

and a manta dive. OK for two average dives (we had fleeting manta encounters), and good for photographers, not enough to stay for more, but we did. The PM dives were variations on the morning dives. Thursday — back to Gau for...what? Gau wall (the lunar landscape), Jim's alley for the 3rd time, a half-dead spot called Anthias, then a suggestion from Fritz that we do Jim's alley again. Not really! So we tried Gau Passage with a shark feed. Despite tide tables and waiting for hours, the tide was going out in a big way, not in, and the shark feed dive turned into a mess. It was real high voltage if you happened to be near (but not too near!) the guide and were able to cling to the walls, except half our group didn't get the signal, and continued against the current, as briefed, attempting to get to the designated shark feeding area before giving up and drifting back down to the rest of us. They missed at least half of the shark feed, and some of those who didn't miss it, were freaked at the uncontrolled shark feed that ensued. Friday morning — two more dives in Gau Passage, the first a shark feeding that went off as planned, but 4 members of our group were so traumatized by the previous day's feed that they refused the dive. The second Gau Passage dive was done without shark feeding, and it was a good dive with lots of sharks and barracudas and hunting jacks. The Thursday night village visit wasn't in any of the Aggressor documents and we felt that Thursday and Friday dives were dictated by the village visit, rather than by our diving requests. The captain,

not a diver, didn't understand that we did want to dive 4 to 5 times every day and didn't fulfill the dive schedule, to get us to (or keep us at) great dives sites, or to get tanks filled promptly or swap out spare full tanks for empties. We tried to have fruitful discussions, but because we didn't know what options were available, and the Fijian crew were not likely to voice opinions contrary to the captain's, so we really didn't have the data we needed to make good decisions. By the time we realized that Monday and Tuesday were the high points, and the rest of the week was going downhill fast, it was too late to make any reasonable adjustments. We didn't travel this far to make dives that are worse than those we get by traveling to much cheaper dive destinations — like Mexico or the Caribbean.

***Nai'a*, January 2003, John Jo Lewis (heyjohnjo@yahoo.com), Redondo Beach, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. Depending on conditions, *Nai'a's* Fiji itinerary will take a unique path through unspoiled and dramatic reefs and bommies in the Bligh Water region, North and East of Viti Levu. The reefs and pinnacles we dove during this year's 10 day charter were a revelation. Coral and fish life were diverse, abundant and colorful in the extreme. Take a look at all the prettiest footage in the Coral Reef Adventure Imax film to get an accurate idea. It was all shot diving at reefs pinpointed by Rob Barrel and Cat Holloway, *Nai'a* owners who frequently host these voyages. Their knowledge

of Fiji waters combined with an experienced and enthusiastic crew, show the Bligh waters at their best, as they are able to plan diving at their favorite spots so as to take advantage of ideal tide and current conditions in a way that is almost uncanny. The height of live-aboard luxury is being at the right place at the right time, staying as long as you like, and surfacing to find your dive tender waiting to pick you up and whisk you back to a warm towel and a relaxing surface interval. The skill and efficiency of *Nai'a's* friendly Fijian crew make all of this look easy, even if you're hard core enough to repeat the experience 5 times a day. Food was plentiful and tasty, cabins are pleasant and the plumbing works. Happy, competent crew. Plenty of room for tinkering, crew is camera savvy and helpful about preventing equipment mishaps. Help is available if you want to improve your photographic skills. (www.naia.com.fj)

***Nai'a*, February 2003, Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, surge. Not only were the staff wonderful, the diving extraordinary, the rest of the guests interesting and great divers, a couple planned ahead and had their wedding on the boat one night (with no one from their family) — we all celebrated with them! A great trip and a great operation. Great photography set up. As we were on the boat with Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach, we got to see how the real pros set up and did their work. The *Nai'a* was up to it.