

by curious divers and photographers, playful bottlenose dolphins and several beefy silvertip sharks. Mantas were seen on several dives, often quite close. An impressive sailfish (6-7 ft) slowly cruised above us and flared its large dorsal fin before darting into the blue. After surfacing from one dive, excitement peaked with the anticipation of a bait ball as thousands of birds were observed on the water near the skiff. Divers quickly became snorkelers and chased the migrating baitfish. Unfortunately, we arrived too early for the show. No underwater predators were seen, but one mobula did swim by us. Large schools of snappers and barracuda (and solitary great barracuda) were seen frequently. Other reef residents included Napoleons, dogtooth tuna, lionfish and many species of butterfly, angel (particularly flame angels), wrasse and triggerfish. Anemones with clownfish, nudibranchs, tridacna clams, cowries, pipefish and scorpionfish were rarely seen. The 45-minute dive limit was somewhat restrictive. Other rules and safety precautions were reasonable. Without soft corals, the reefs lack color and variety and reef dives were often indistinguishable and repetitive. The divemasters were not interested in finding unusual critters, probably because this is not a great destination for macro subjects. However, they did point out the larger pelagics. The skiff was slightly crowded with 18 divers and 3 divemasters. Pickups were usually prompt, but I waited 5-10 minutes on the surface after a few dives. Some hook-in spots for the initial pass dives were crowded with divers. At one site in particular, it was almost impossible

to see the sharks through the continuous wall of bubbles (I relocated for a better view). The dining room was warm, probably due to its close proximity to the kitchen, and crawling bugs (possibly roaches) were occasionally present throughout the boat. Not serious problems though. Upon arrival, there was a strong mildew odor in the cabins, but it diminished during the trip. We flew into Papeete and spent the night (at the Royal Tahitian) before flying to Rangiroa to meet the boat (spent a few hours and had breakfast at Raira Lagoon hotel before boarding in the afternoon). On our return, we had a day room at the Sheraton in Papeete. Very luxurious hotel and quite expensive (\$20-25 for lunch). It is a short ride (on Le Truck for \$1) to downtown for cafes and a fabulous 2- story "mall" featuring a fish market, food vendors, tattoo parlors, handicrafts and tropical clothing. Black pearl shops are everywhere (and a vendor even sets up shop on the *Aggressor* on the last day).

HAWAII

***Kona Aggressor II*, September 2002, Keith & Ellen Irwin (irwinkw@earthlink.net), San Jose, CA.**

Experience: 101250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, surge, no currents. This is easy diving with a great crew and superb food and service. The boat is an 87-foot catamaran with five ensuite cabins off the large salon and a quad cabin on the top deck. All had queen size beds below and a single bunk above. A sink, vacuum-flush head (no smells), and a shower are in each stateroom. A/C is con-

trolled by individual thermostats and was comfortable. The food was fabulous. Christine is a graduate of the San Francisco Culinary Academy, and Brian came from the Culinary Institute of America in New York. Both had wonderful creations but were willing to adapt to meet individual needs. You hook up your own gear for the first dive. After that, your tank is immediately refilled after every dive. Fins stay on the dive deck and other gear can go in a locker under your bench. Nitrox is 100 for the week. Water is the warmest this time of year. I dove mostly with a Polartec skin but used a 3-mm wetsuit at night. Others dove in a t-shirt and swimsuit. The competent and friendly staff will leave you alone or go with you on the dive. At least one divemaster is in the water and another on the dive deck. The diving is typically shallow. I never exceeded 65 feet except at Au Au Crater where we went to 100 feet to see a lion fish. The number of little critters far exceeds Caribbean diving. Also saw lots of eels and a number of turtles. Lots of opportunities for macro photographers. But the bottom is mostly lava formations covered with hard corals. No soft corals and few sponges. Not a lot of color. We saw few large critters. At the Maze, we spotted two large tarpon cruising the drop off. And on the last night we were treated to a spectacular show by four mantas who cavorted about for over an hour scooping plankton and other small critters attracted by the lights on the boat and the underwater video cameras. It was breath taking. Porpoises often followed the boat, but we didn't see any while diving.

Dedicated dive table and two rinse tanks. Onboard processing. Video player on board. Captain Gui is a photo pro and willing to share his knowledge. (www.aggressor.com)

Kona Aggressor, March 2003, Sherwin Isenberg, M.D., Los Angeles, CA.

Vis: 40-70 feet. Water: 74-75 F. Dives logged: 450. Big island diving is different. No massive schools of fish. There are beautiful tropicals on every dive, but the quantity is not like the Caribbean. Yet we enjoyed pyramid butterfly fish, sergeants, damsels, moorish idols, angels, soldiers. What distinguishes the Kona Coast is volcanic geologic structures, arches, caverns, swim throughs, caves, tunnels, etc. They are fun to negotiate. Night dives present octopuses, lobsters, crabs, sleeping sharks, beautiful giant ghost shrimp. 5-mm suit comfortable. *Kona Aggressor* is well run with a light, enjoyable atmosphere. Cook Brian deserves to cook in a top restaurant. The boat is a catamaran which rocks side to side instead of front to back. Your cabin opens directly into the common area — this limits privacy, but increases convenience. A well-run operation with a unique distinction — a tropical live-aboard that is 100% American!

Kona Aggressor, July 2003, Al & Kathy Knoblock, Littleton, CO.

Experience: 5,000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 70 feet. Water: 79-80 F. Hawaii, except Midway, is fished out. For \$5.00 you can get a license to collect anything. No fishing restrictions. Few schools of anything. Nice topography, great food, good crew, and relaxing. Advice would

be to forget Hawaii and spend the extra time and bucks to experience other fabulous destinations in the Pacific.

MICRONESIA

Palau

Big Blue Explorer, March 2003,
Lauren Henderson, Kona, HI.

Experience: 350+ dives. Vis. 60 to 100 feet. Water temp. 78-82 F. Weather — mostly cloudy with some sun and some rain — low 80s. The BBE is not your glamour type live-aboard, but what it lacks in beauty it makes up for: lots of great diving, helpful, fun crew, lots of space, and you never go hungry! Palau's diversity and thrilling diving makes it worth traveling around the world for. 4-5 dives a day and even when the boat moves it is just a short distance so you don't lose any dive time. In one week I did 23 dives (skipped a few night dives) which included sheer walls covered with hard and soft corals, coral gardens, the caverns of Chandler Caves, blue holes, and Jelly Fish Lake. The famed Blue Corner is where the sharks come close enough for good pictures. There were sharks (mostly gray reef and white tips) on most of the dives but often they kept their distance. We also had a snorkeling experience that got us up close to a beautiful pair of feeding mantas. Turtles were also plentiful as were the photogenic clown fish. I also managed to get some good lion fish shots. The large schools of barracuda and jacks were impressive. Colorful clams, from 5 inches to 5 feet, were abundant. I was impressed by the amount of fish life

and the health of the reefs. The staff was organized and efficient. They suggested that we get up early and get to the hot sites before the land-based operations. The dive days ran smoothly with entertaining and detailed briefings, gearing up, then loading the tenders and heading off to the sites, usually about 10-15 min. away. Each tender has its own area to gear up, so it is not crowded. There are 3 shower nozzles for rinsing off afterwards. Most guests used Nitrox, and we analyzed our own tanks. The tenders were well equipped and covered for protection from the sun. Gear was left on the boats during the day and removed after the last dive. Cameras were given a separate room on the dive deck. The meals were buffet style and there was a variety of dishes including vegetarian. The cabins are located on two decks. Spend the extra money to be on the B deck, the cabins are much roomier. Each cabin has a bath with shower. My shower didn't have hot water so Manager Lynn made arrangements for me to have my own crew shower (cleaned completely) until mine was fixed. They had to tear out the ceiling to fix the wiring, and they did this while I was diving. I came back to hot water. After one guest completed her 300th dive, another guest (a snorkeler with her diver husband) completed 2 discover scuba dives, and I did my dive #350, the staff had a big cake for the three of us. A destination for experienced divers only. On one dive at Pelileu, what started out at a lovely wall dive turned into a "hang on for your life" experience. The current was stronger than expected and we hooked on to the reef to watch the parade of