

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-

tee of sharks or good weather. ... Manta rays are more reliable, and they have a reputation for letting divers approach them. ... In winter and spring there's a thermocline, with 70 to 80 degree water on the surface and 50 to 60 degree water below 30-40 feet. ... Visibility is low (25-40 feet) in midsummer; it generally improves to 80 to 100 feet by late summer. ... From December through May winds kick up the water, which makes diving difficult. ... Wear a wetsuit for protection from jellyfish even if the water's warm. ... Whale-watching season is from December through March. ... The nice hotels and restaurants from Cabo to the North have helped make it a long-weekend retreat for some California divers.

## La Paz

**Baja Quest & Baja Expeditions, Los Arcos Cabanas, October 2002, Tina Petersen (tinabobina@email.com), Omaha, NE.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: choppy, currents. Baja Quest Caters to Japanese divers. They had to bring in a divemaster fluent in English to dive with us — we were the only two Americans that week. Since they only had five divers that week, they took out only small boats. We went to their shop to eat breakfast every morning then headed out on a small Panga. Lunch was packed on the boat and often included the captain making a salad from a 1 gallon jar of unrefrigerated mayonnaise. We had a different boat

all four days we dove, two of which were rented from the marina or another dive shop. Mario, our temp divemaster was not impressive. At El Bajo the current was whipping and he didn't go over the anchor line descent with us. Luckily I figured it out before I jumped off the boat; I had never done such a challenging dive before, but we saw two hammerheads in the distance only for a second. Swells were 7 to 9 feet one day in our panga and were all praying to make it. Water temp got to you by third dive in a 3mm suit; needed a hood or another suit. All in all the diving in La Paz was great. Got to play with three 12-foot mantas, loved playing with the sea lions. Schools of Mexican barracuda, bait balls, free swimming morays; wonderful! Very little coral but if you want to see big stuff, La Paz is the place to go. We wanted to dive a fifth day with Baja Quest; but they said they had already made other arrangements for the other two divers they had signed up. Turns out they sent them to Baja Expeditions for the day along with their Japanese divemaster. Be careful making payment; a check they received had to send back to me because it was made out to the wrong person and got lost in the mail. Baja Expeditions: diving on the *Rio Rita* was great! Breakfast, lunch, and snacks are cooked fresh in front of you on the boat. The food was awesome. Full cooler to grab a pop between dives and beer after the third dive. Also served up margaritas and chips with fresh guacamole on the ride home. Camera table, gear rinse barrel right on the boat. The *Rio Rita* is a slow boat, but the ride was lots of fun.

Robert and Alfredo were wonderful divemasters; catered to your skill level. Los Arcos Cabanas; rooms were clean, maid service good. Mini bar: cheap — \$2 beers. Pool was cold; it sat in the shade most of the day, but it was quiet. Restaurant/bar at Los Arcos was good and good prices. Hotel is perfect location for strolling through town and walking to restaurant for dinner.

([www.bajaquest.com.mx](http://www.bajaquest.com.mx),  
[www.bajaex.com](http://www.bajaex.com))

**Carey Dive Center, aka Buceo Carey,  
Los Arcos Cabanas, November 2002,  
Peter Belden, Palo Alto, CA.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, choppy. Told that Nov 27 is a bit late for the whale sharks. We'd previously been told that the last week of August is too early, so according to the divemasters at Carey Dive Center the whale shark season in La Paz is Sept/Oct. This allegedly is also the season for the giant mantas and the hammerheads, although we saw hammerheads on our previous trip the last week of August. Sept/Oct is also supposed to be insanely busy with divers. The mantas we saw were small, 2- to 3-foot mobula mantas that we observed jumping from the skiff but did not see while diving. As always the playful sea lions at Los Islotes were a highlight of the trip, and they would nip at divers' fins and even allow petting and even stroking their teeth, although I believe it is best to look and not touch. Carey Dive center has an office conveniently located right in town and their boat is only a three minutes drive away in the van, which they use to pick you up right at your hotel.

The small skiffs Carey used were faster than the larger boat used by Baja Diving and Service. Lunch is on an isolated beach, and we had the boat to ourselves. Bring a hood for diving and a wool hat for the boat in November because it's a bit cold. This is our second enjoyable dive trip with Carey Dive Center. We also dove one day with Baja Diving and Service and would recommend Carey Dive Center over Baja Diving and Service. First Baja Diving and Service is about a 30-minute drive out of La Paz. They come and pick you up, but the drive is a pain and a time sink. Then when we arrived at the boat they told us we'd have to wait an hour for them to set up the boat before it departs. Then they told us we were going to El Bajo even when I had specifically pre-arranged in writing in advance that we would not go to El Bajo, because we wanted to try some new dive spots. This argument continued for about 30 minutes, but then it became clear that the waves wouldn't let us make it to El Bajo anyway. Los Arcos Cabanas was a nice place to stay, conveniently located in town but not too noisy. They appear to have almost no king/queen beds at all, and there is little difference among the types of rooms within the cabanas. Breakfast is not included, and the pool closes at 10 p.m. I would return to Los Arcos again. La Paz is a nice, quiet destination with low cost hotels and food. The dive sites are generally a one-hour ride each way. Go and enjoy La Paz now before increased cruise ship traffic and general growth and development ruin this nice out of the way spot. ([www.carey.com.mx](http://www.carey.com.mx))

## Loreto

**Baja Outpost, November 2002, Robin Masson (ram@wigginsandmasson.com), Ithaca, NY.** Vis: 25 to 40 feet. Water: 75 to 80 F. Dives logged: 200. Dive restrictions enforced: 500 psi at end. Very personal service. They even put our fins on for us! Small group — six divers max with one DM in the water. Lots of reef fish. Soft corals and rock formations — little hard coral. Round palapas were unique romantic quarters. Excellent breakfast. Good restaurant recommendations for dinner. Outpost has good quality mountain bikes to borrow free, and town is safe, accessible by foot or bike. A topnotch, family-run place. Romantic refuge from civilization. Leon, owner, will arrange trip to cave paintings and petroglyphs worth doing. ([www.bajaoutpost.com](http://www.bajaoutpost.com))

**Baja Outpost, May 2003, Jeremy Isenberg (isenberg@wai.com), Atherton, CA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 65 to 70 F, calm. I picked it for my diving vacation because of Leon Fichman's businesslike manner on the phone. I was entirely satisfied with what I found — extremely comfortable, quiet, and well-appointed accommodations and well-prepared hot breakfasts. Leon maintains a wide-range of equipment to supplement what I had brought, which was essential as the water is colder than I am used to. The Baja Outpost dive boats are equipped with big engines, a real plus when the dive destination may be 20 miles distant. The Baja Outpost boatmaster, Kiki, is

the best driver I have encountered, an advantage if the wind should pick up during the return journey. Among the unexpected pleasures of the visit was a late afternoon meal of clams, fresh-picked from the Sea of Cortez and roasted with cheese at the Baja Outpost kitchen. Diving is predictably unpredictable, and so, though I went to Loreto to see giant mantas, I was happy enough to see five of the eight local species of nudibranchs instead.

## Los Cabos

**Vista Sea Sport, Hotel Buena Vista, June 2003, Sheldon Appel, Los Angeles, CA.** I contacted Mark Rayor and made arrangements through him to go diving with my two sons-in-law and three grandsons. We had one of the most wonderful experiences of all time. Mark's operation is first class; he and his staff are both competent and congenial; and the diving was sensational. We stayed at the Hotel Buena Vista which was Spartan but clean, served our needs nicely, and is reasonably priced. I would recommend the Rancho Buena Vista, a popular East Cape hotel that enjoyed its 50th anniversary last year. We contacted them for reservations more than six months in advance, but a wedding was taking place during the time of our scheduled trip, and all rooms were already booked. Mexicana Airlines' flight attendants were the worst I have experienced in my 70 years of extensive travel. The three female attendants were incompetent, inattentive, and rude. ([www.vistaseasport.com](http://www.vistaseasport.com), [www.hotelbuenavista.com](http://www.hotelbuenavista.com))

### UNITED STATES - CALIFORNIA

#### **Open Water Dive Shop & Sand Dollar (boat), June 2002, Don Henderson, Lockney, TX.**

Dives Logged: 58. Vis: Clear. Water Temp: 66 F. I shopped the Internet for a long desired Catalina Diving Adventure! I selected this boat and the shop which had it chartered for the day, as it was the only one with Nitrox, but I hadn't realized how useless Nitrox would be for this trip?! I had to board in the dark for an early departure and a 2.5-hour boat ride across on an overcrowded vessel. They'd promised plenty of room for everyone to have a bunk for a nap, but all were taken by the time I boarded. We were too crowded between dives, but we were fed good, hot meals — during both crossings and between dives. Still, it'd certainly helped if one of the three galley tables hadn't been devoted to the TV and VCR. I knew the water would be about as cold as in the Santa Rosa NM Blue Hole, so I packed my Poly Skin, a 3 mm long neoprene, and a slightly larger 3 mm short neoprene — expecting a 7 mm layered benefit, along with my neoprene beanie, gloves, and booties. And I was fine until I hit the 45-foot thermocline; couldn't stay below it long enough for my thermometer to register the change. The diving was a super change from warm water dives of the Caribbean and the Florida Keys, i.e., different fish, some endemic to the Channel Islands, totally different invertebrates, and majestic kelp forest! Crawled through the bottoms of 40-foot thickets with the lead of

locally experienced divers. A great one day adventure.  
([www.divingcharters.com](http://www.divingcharters.com))

### UNITED STATES - WASHINGTON

#### Seattle

**Soundwave Scuba, October 2002, Dr. Kathleen T. Brown (k.brown62@comeast.net), Martinez, GA.** Vis: 20 to 40 feet. Water: 49 F. Dives logged: 35. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limits advised, divers able to dive own profile. Only experienced divers aboard. First class operation. Owner — Jeff Rogers — knows the waters of Puget Sound like the back of his hand. Very competent, helpful, and not trying to rip people off. Has deck hand (Diane) carefully monitor everyone's air use. Very helpful aiding divers with equipment, etc. Provides plenty of food, shelter, hot water, books to ID specimens. Very enjoyable dives — had a memorable close encounter with the Pacific octopus.  
([www.soundwavescuba.com](http://www.soundwavescuba.com))

#### Tacoma

**Port Hole Divers, September 2002, Dan Guill, Graham, WA.** Dives logged: 800. PADI Instructor. For advanced divers. Port Hole Charters is out of Tacoma, WA, mainly operates in Commencement Bay. It is owned and operated by Captain Michael Ferguson. He and his divemasters have been diving these waters since the late '70s. They are mostly firefighters and paramedics and are some of the nicest peo-