

was great, the boat was clean and nice, the food good. After each dive the crew would take your gear to prepare for the next dive, including rinsing and hanging our wetsuits. Someone always had warm towels, snacks, and hot chocolate or tea ready as we came aboard. There are some land tours, to see the turtles, sea lions, bird life. Most days we were offered 4 dives, and one day a night dive was offered for 5 total, but conditions were not good for night dives — i.e., current. A great trip if you like big animals. The crew and 12 other divers on board were great. This may not be a trip for beginning divers because of the current and cool waters.

Sky Dancer, July 2003, Russ Lido (rlido@comcast.net), Sterling Heights, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 feet. Water: 61 to 77 F, calm, choppy, surge. Our fourth live-aboard with Peter Hughes. We flew into Quito, Ecuador, and were put up at a nice hotel for the night. We were told not to venture too far from the hotel because Quito has a crime problem. The next morning we flew to San Cristobal, Galapagos, on AeroGal Airlines. Despite all the baggage fears, we weren't charged for excess weight. Try to fly that airline instead of Tame Airlines. We traveled 565 miles on the *Sky Dancer*. It's a fine boat, but book the upper deck cabins because the water can get rough. The cabins are more money but well worth it. We cruised the Galapagos Islands and saw lots of sea lions, penguins, schooling hammerhead sharks, turtles, stingrays, and over 20 whale sharks. There is so much sea life you can get sensory

overload, but don't expect to find magnificent coral. Darwin and Wolf Islands are some of the best diving I have ever done. Best times are June thru Nov., if you want to see the whale sharks. I would go June, July again because the water at Darwin and Wolf is warmer (77 F). The other islands it was 61 to 69 F. The diving can be challenging and not good for beginners. We also did three land tours and two snorkel trips, which were also good. The crew did a great job of taking care of the divers. They even helped you get your wetsuit off and they rinsed and hung it up for you. The food was worst part. They cook a local menu, and it was not up to the Peter Hughes standards we were used to from other live-aboards. Galapagos were a true adventure of a lifetime. Large camera table and electrical outlets for charging 110-220v.

MEXICO

La Paz

Don Jose, October 2002, Robert Bishop, Mesa, AZ. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 110 feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm. Half my dive gear was lost in flight and arrived two days late. The captain modified the itinerary to meet a launch sent out from La Paz ferrying my luggage. I just assumed I would not see my gear until the week was over. They made the extra effort seem like their day service. The visibility was much better than anticipated. The crew was as good as any of the 7 live-aboards I have used. I do fish surveys for REEF and was surprised at the number of fish species. We had two

dives with 100+ visibility and 5 to 7 manta rays that stayed between two sea mounts for the entire dive. The *Don Jose* is a smaller live-aboard, older, but comfortable. The air conditioning was easily controlled in my cabin and worked perfectly. The owner of the *Don Jose* has worked for years to protect the marine environment around La Paz and that manifests itself with the entire crew. The food was above average. I always can eat seconds and would have enjoyed larger portions. (www.bajaex.com)

Don Jose, Baja Expeditions,
September 2003, Ron Steckel
(rsteckel@bacchusvascular.com),
Campbell, CA. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 82-86 F. Experience: 302 dives. My fourth trip on the *Don Jose* — 80 ft live-aboard with 16 divers and 7 crew. It's a kick-back week with some spectacular sights. Sea lion rookery, sea mounts, wrecks, etc. On other visits there is a wide range of rays, sharks, turtles, even mantas. But this time things were pretty sparse. Water temp likely drove the big stuff deeper. Conditions were very calm. Good crew, many old timers, and Kevin was a great DM. Good value for money — just hoped for more pelagics.

Sea of Cortez

Solmar V, October 2002, Rickie Sterne & Chrisanda Button
(rickandchris@alltel.net), **Elkins, AR.**
Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F. Near-perfect weather during our week in the Sea of Cortez. This trip was our first venture

outside the Caribbean, and we were enchanted by the landscapes of the Baja both above and below water. We enjoyed six dives with several large mantas at La Reyna. At the end of one dive, two mantas danced around the divers hovering at their rest stop. We enjoyed up close and personal encounters with sea lions at Los Islotes; one pup nipped at me playfully and allowed me to stroke his chin. We saw most of the locally endemic fish pictured on the REEF website and developed a new appreciation for echinoderms and mollusks. One night dive was eerily beautiful with hundreds of sea cucumbers and zebra ribbon worms oozing over the rocky bottom. We saw several urchins moving. We also saw our first sea horses and nudibranchs. We were skunked in our quest for hammerheads, however. There were strong and shifting currents at several sites. The *Solmar* is a revamped yacht whose entire interior is wood-paneled. The dive deck is spacious and well organized, while the cabins are tiny and well organized. Since our luggage was taken away to be stored elsewhere, we did not feel crowded in our superior cabin. The superior cabins aren't really any larger than the others, but they are better laid out and are located amidships. The word "gourmet" keeps cropping up when we discuss Pedro's meals. All meals are served by the steward. While we enjoyed this arrangement, some people in our group missed the all-you-can-eat buffets encountered on other live-aboards. After each dive, a divemaster recorded our time and maximum depth. The panga drivers were efficient when a

group of divers got washed off the seamount. We felt that this diving around current-swept seamounts was the most challenging we had done, but also some of the most interesting. The last day we dove on the Cabo Plumo reef, a group of sparse patch and spur corals that boast the distinction of being the northernmost coral in the Pacific. The only weak point of the whole trip was the confusing arrangements for shore transportation. (www.solmar.com/solmarv.html)

Solmar V, November/December 2002, Tom Harvey, Hillsdale, NJ. I have just finished my 35th live-aboard on the *Solmar V*. We went to the Socorro Group in the Mexican Pacific. We started the trip at Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, rustic. The diving from shore was below par. Low vis and limited dive sites. Dead or missing coral. Not worth the trouble. My wife and I boarded the *Solmar V* at Cabo San Lucas marina. The boat was spotless. We had booked room 202 in the bow looking for more cabin space, a mistake. The boat carries 24 guests, and the cabins are tiny. The crew was helpful and friendly. The food superior and plentiful. The pangas were well equipped and always handy. Good dive briefings and dive plans. The boat has no soul. The two forward sitting and dining areas had to be vacated so the crew could eat and hang out — wrong. The main salon is too small for any interaction with other guests. The diving was average — but with many manta encounters — too many. There were few hammerhead sightings and dolphins. There is no macro or reef — none. Big stuff

encounters do happen, but this is not CoCos. There are few dive sites, and they do not move often. Most of the diving is done on San Benidito Island. Lots of mantas. You have a 24-hour crossing to Socorro Island. I always enjoy sea cruising, but if you get sick stay home. It was a pleasant trip but not an adventure or not nearly worth the cost. Bring a good book, and try not to get too bored unless you really enjoy five days of petting the undersides of mantas — your choice. At Cabo Plumo, avoid Nancy's Place. Save your money and avoid her attitude. She is not worth getting annoyed.

Solmar V, February 2003, Warren Sprung, Houston, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, calm, choppy. Boat was wonderful. Rooms were small, but great otherwise. Plenty of hot water and plenty of a/c. Beautiful boat — lots of polished mahogany. Seas were kind to us. The 22-hour crossings (each way) were some of the nicest down time we've ever enjoyed. Sharks were up close and personal — grand experience. Manta experiences at El Boiler were world class — put Yap to shame. These guys were big (18 feet), plentiful (usually five), and giant puppies! Mating season for humpback whales — they were everywhere! Jumping in the distance, blowing all around us. Got to snorkel with them and dolphins as well. Cannot tell you how exhilarating it was to hit the water and have numerous curious sharks (kinda like barracudas do) come check you out face to face! The hammers were in untold numbers in Galapagos, but here

the sharks (only three hammers all week) were in your face and non-threatening. A must do in this lifetime!

***Solmar V*, March 2003, Barbara Petrecca (seagoddess@comcast.net), Perry Hall, MD.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 74 to 76 F, surge, currents. I was very disappointed. I know the dive conditions and marine life cannot be controlled but the e-mails and website are misleading. We did see whales at a distance, but we could not get close to them as bragged about in their emails. There were dolphins — but they were unapproachable. I can see these animals while I am on the surface at home. No whale sharks but this was expected as I was told before we left by Jay that I probably wouldn't see one. This was a little disheartening as the whale sharks were part of the reason we chose the Socorro and the *Solmar V*. I believed what was written on the web page. These islands have been compared to Galapagos or Cocos in the quality of big animal encounters and called "Mexican Galapagos" (quoted from their website) — what happened? We saw approximately 5 hammerhead (2 at Split Rock and 3 at San Benedicto) — hardly what I would call huge schools. We saw a few Galapagos sharks here and there. Split Rock did have quite a few silver tips. And silkies were always under the boat. The mantas were magnificent. The most I saw were two in the water at the same time while diving. We did not make it to the Boiler. We were told we would be going there on the

last day, definitely by panga if the *Solmar* was unable to find shelter there. We did not, nor were we given any explanation — we just anchored and did 4 more dives at the Canyon. The divemasters' procedure of getting time and depth information from each returning diver frequently meant leaving the back of the boat unmanned. This made it difficult for other divers to exit the water with camera equipment. Of the three divemasters, two were usually in the water while one remained on deck. The silkies had a reason to be under the boat. They were being fed. During one dive, one divemaster was throwing raw fish into the water by the ladders while divers were on the hang line. Although silkies seem rather mild and remind me of nurse sharks, this feeding did make one rather aggressive and caused concern. During the next dive the same divemaster was in the water feeding the silkies near the hang line. I found that diving the same dive site 7 times a little much. We only did 17 dives. The food was hardly "gourmet meals" mentioned on the web page. They were plain and prepared poorly. The portion sizes, although sufficient for myself, were small for others. Even my request for more flour tortillas at one lunch was declined. There were no snacks after dives (something mentioned on the website as well) until a guest requested it. It felt like we were being rationed on food. I have taken two Blackbeard Cruises (which are similar to diving camping trips) and received better meals. I did enjoy my night at the *Solmar Suites* until I discovered I had

paid much more for our room than other guests from the *Solmar 5*. I had to fight for the discount, but I still paid approximately 25% more. There are discounted *Solmar 5* rates given to late-booking guests to fill the boat (\$900 — we did get a \$300 discount). Don't be fooled by their hype. I wish I had read my several Chapbooks before I made my reservations. *Solmar's* response to my concerns — “you would change your mind if you experienced the real Socorro Islands” & “I also would like you to come back and see that we took your comments seriously, as we do all constructive criticism, as far as the boat operations.” *Solmar* should have had it right on my first trip.

***Solmar V*, March 2003, John Kontnik, Lakewood, CO.** Dives logged: 500-plus. The good: the reservation staff in California had everything organized perfectly (airport pickups, land reservations, pickup for boat, etc.). The manta interactions were superb, and we saw six different types of sharks. The boat cabin staff were great and worked hard and were fun. The bad: in 6.5 days of diving we only visited eight sites (there must be more). The island of Socorro had diving that you would expect in a fair Caribbean dive site, yet we spent two days there. The beds are 6-feet long — tough for a 6'5" guy — and the showers are an adventure (head and shower in one). Axel, the head dive-master was loud, obnoxious. Frequently, there was no one at the back of the boat to hand camera equipment to at the end of the dive.

The four vegetarians had quite a time on this trip — not nearly enough vegetables for their needs. One night the only vegan on board was served a plate of pasta — that is all, no vegetables or sauce, just pasta. We had some good-looking filets that were so overcooked one could have used them for hockey pucks. At the end of the trip some guests took a poll as to where the life vests were; no one knew, we were never told, and no one thought to ask. Some flan was left out at room temperature overnight, and the next morning we were asked if anyone wanted some — you have got to be kidding. It was a food thing: some guests brought some popcorn or between-dive snacks would have been crackers (a passenger had to ask for them). The lazy: Only eight dive sites in 6.5 days was weak, the food was weak, and dive staff could have been much better — yet despite all this because of the manta interactions it will be a trip to remember for a life time. If we had not received a deep discount (\$900 — the boat was not filling), I would have been plenty mad; some of the other passengers were not so generous. To call this the Mexican Galapagos is an insult to the Galapagos, but once again the manta interaction were second to none.

UNITED STATES

California

***Horizon*, San Diego Shark Diving Expeditions, September 2003, Dorothy McDonald, Strongsville, OH.** Experience: 251-500 dives.