

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

sharks but the force of the water was too much for fun. I was scared my mask or reg. would get pulled off. I had to hang on to them and my camera for dear life till the DM got our attention to let go. The current swept us like a water slide and we all stayed pretty much together. One guest lost two lenses and Terry, Gat and Caroline went back and found the wide angle. That was above and beyond the call of duty! Jellyfish Lake — approximately 20 million jellyfish at the time we were there and we arrived early enough to beat the other dive operations. Caroline video taped our week and did a wonderful job putting the week's highlights onto a video (or DVD). Every guest bought one. (www.palausecuba.com)

Odyssey, September 2003, Martha & Jeff Hubbard (hubbard182@att.net), Glenmont, NY. Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 10 to 40 feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm, choppy. *Odyssey* was planned, designed, and is run day-to-day and dive-to-dive by the principals, Captains Lenny and Cara Kolczynski. It's spacious. The wood-paneled staterooms (forget "cabins") are the largest we have enjoyed. Private bathrooms house the shower and toilet; the sink is in the stateroom itself. The dive deck and dining saloon are large, and there is a separate lounge (large enough for all passengers) with charging station and elaborate electronic entertainment equipment. The extensive library covers marine life as well as the history of the Pacific War and Hailstorm, the February 1944 bombing of Truk which sank the Japanese fleet on which we dive. Staterooms have 2 individual fan

controls for air conditioning. We ran ours at a minimum because we were on the lower deck which is about 3/4ths below surface (large portholes at surface level) where the warm air and sun don't reach the hull. There are four dive opportunities per day and a night dive after dinner. When a detour to the fringing reef (for a shark feed — not our cup of tea) took longer than planned, they rearranged the schedule to ensure a dive wasn't missed. There are 80 cu ft and 112 cu ft tanks available, and nitrox (for those certified) is 30% O₂, putting the 1.6 atm pO₂ depth at 143 ft. The big tanks made long dives possible for everyone. Ours averaged 50 min. without pushing air or deco. Most of the wrecks have shallower structures like masts and king-posts, covered with sea life, which permit finishing the dive at shallower depths, not just hanging on the line. We made 27 dives (skipped one night dive) and on about 5 had to shorten the dive or ascend a little because of approaching decompression. *San Francisco Maru* is the only planned deco dive (200 ft max); we skipped it because of the recommendation to skip the night dive before and the next dive after, and made a simultaneous dive on a nearby wreck. The dive briefings, by one of the captains or British divemaster, Matt, are comprehensive and include excellent diagrams, which is important as each wreck has different features and hazards. All the wrecks are within the lagoon, some close to islands, so visibility is less than in the open ocean. Diving is from the wide fantail, 4 steps down from dive deck, with two big ladders for exit. Safety bar at 12 feet,

freshwater shower on fantail. There were some relative rookies aboard (<50 dives), who took an advanced course and did fine. The captains, Matt, and Chuukese Madison and Davy are all ready to help everyone. The captains and crew have retained their enthusiasm for Truk diving. There is a real at-home feeling, since *Odyssey* is the Kolczynski home, complete with Shasta the ship's (nondiving) cat. Getting there is long (26 hr for us) but Continental was reliable. Matt is knowledgeable and helpful on digital and film photography. E-6 on board. Big photo table on dive deck, large light table in lounge. Two cameras-and-computers and only fresh water tanks at stern.

(www.trukodyssey.com)

***Odyssey*, September 2003, Rod & Jeannie McLean, Denver, CO.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 35 to 75 feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm, no currents. Incredible wreck diving. Truk has the sites, and the *Odyssey* gets you to the ones you want with a professionalism and style you'll love. Lenny and Cara have put together a wonderful operation. Best dive briefings we've ever heard. Of the four live-aboards we've done, this is in a class of its own. The guides (Davey, Madison, and Matt) will lead you through the wreck interiors and engine rooms on a tour designed for your comfort level. In addition to aluminum 80s, the available 112 cubic foot steel tanks (din or yoke) and twins come in air or 30% Nitrox (included at no extra charge) to allow for extended bottom times. They also hang a tank from the safety stop bar. This one was so good it

inspired our first reader report in over three years and twelve trips as an *Undercurrent* subscriber.

***Odyssey*, September 2003, Russ Snyder (usaexpat@btinternet.com), Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland, OH.**

Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. I left the UK on a Tuesday and arrived Truk Friday AM. I would recommend a day of rest when you arrive as jet-lag is an issue especially as long flights can result in dehydration. I dove with the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop (BLDS) on Saturday and Sunday. The DMs are great and have an uncanny knack of pointing to a direction when instructing the boat drivers, and bingo you're on top of a wreck. The boats are fast, and since there were only six of us in a 25 footer, room was not an issue. The rides are a bit rough, which is OK for a couple of days, but I would not want to do a week's worth of diving off these small boats. Nothing stays dry on the boats and camera equipment is in peril. The boat seating area is painted with an orange material that will come off on your clothing so wear stuff you don't mind getting ruined. The *Odyssey* trip started on Sunday evening. In general this is a great boat. The food was terrific and there was always a cooked-to-order breakfast of your choice each day. Snacks were plentiful and tasty. I had one of the single rooms up front and it was as big as some double rooms on other live-aboards. The DMs were fine, with one British guy as the lead and two locals who were outstanding. They even put your fins on your feet on the

dive deck! The camera table is big; always an important consideration for us photographers. They use 112 cubic feet aluminum tanks which means that, unless you are a total air hog, you run out of time way before you run out of gas. The *Odyssey* uses 30% Nitrox as standard which covers the ranges I was diving, albeit at a PO2 of 1.6 on my Cobra and Stinger. Tours were available if you wanted them or you could do your own thing. There were 11 divers on this trip and all were well-experienced. The wrecks are the obvious attraction as otherwise the dives would be boring. During eight days I was able to dive on the *Fujikawa*, *Shinkoku*, *Sankisan*, *Heian*, *Kansho*, *Rio DeJaneiro*, *Yamagiri*, *Hanakawa*, *Fumizuki Destroyer*, *Unkai*, *Gosei*, *Betty Bomber* (one to miss in my opinion), *Nippo*, and the *Seiko*. The *Fujikawa* and the *Shinkoku* are the premier wrecks, and they are awesome, but my favorite was the *Nippo*. The tank on the deck is a great photo op although it means going to about 130 FSW to get an upward angle. The bridge is also quite impressive. I was able to get in the water first on that dive and, after making a quick visit to the tank, headed for the pilot house at about 90 FSW. As I entered the room I could hardly see the telegraph for all the bait fish but hit the flash. A huge Napoleon wrasse must have been hidden from view as he darted away (thankfully) from me. On the second dive on the *Nippo* I was in front of the pilot house and witnessed a feeding frenzy by a school of yellow and black striped trevails. Not sure what set them off but something was dead for

sure after that event. All the while the Napoleon wrasse was calmly moving around gulping down scraps. The visibility during the week I was there varied from OK (60 feet) to awful (20 feet). It rained off and on all week so less than ideal conditions were to be expected. Bring your macro outfit for those low-vis days. The diving in Truk is deep and the profiles are flat. Most of the dives were over 100 feet deep or more. The divers on the boat usually stopped for a minute or more at half of the maximum depth and then did a six to ten minute safety stop. Truk now has a recompression chamber. It's been in operation for about six months and as of this writing has seen no customers. On Sunday a number of us went on a land tour of Dublon; the main island for the Japanese forces. It's a good way to kill a few hours on an otherwise wasted day as the flight to Guam and onward does not leave until 02:00 Monday morning. Bring a rain coat and something soft to sit on as the tour bus is a Toyota pickup truck and everyone climbs in the back. The camera table on the *Odyssey* is large and well appointed. Lighting is good and the three levels of the table allowed for plenty of room.

Palau Aggressor, January 2003, D. Demming (Demmingfsc@aol.com), Hudson, OH. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm. Nitrox was down from most recent refit. Otherwise a friendly crew on a good boat. They were attentive to our needs and even went the extra mile to take our strobe into town to see if a factory rep could get it

working. The boat and crew were both outstanding. Dive sites in Palau seemed a little less pristine than five years ago. We did Truk Lagoon the following week and conditions were also good. The crew worked most of our first night to repair the Nitrox system. In Truk, the native staff was slightly less verbal, and the sites were obviously both deeper and darker.
(www.aggressor.com)

Palau Aggressor, February 2003,
JoAnne & Michael Amoroso
(divergirl6754@aol.com), Doylestown,
PA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 90 feet. Water: 77 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. We chartered the entire boat for our group of 16 from our friend's dive shop in Pennsylvania, all experienced divers. The *Aggressor's* young captain, Ryan, did have a bit of an attitude and was rather condescending and abrupt. After someone in the group had a chat with him, things got better; not a big deal and something we all laughed about but could have been uncomfortable had it been handled differently. The regular cook was off so Rick, one of the divemasters/photo pros filled in. Food was delicious: you really do eat, dive, sleep. The photo pro and instructor, Doug, is a gem — nice, personable, sweet, and an incredible photographer. Take the photo course; it's worth every penny. Doug's slide show and video presentation is delightful; felt like we were celebrities, and this was the show we starred in — okay, a bit hokey, but still enjoyable. Two other divemasters, Ike and Hector, made our trip phenomenal. These two have been around the Rock Islands a long time and

know those reefs and fish better than anyone else. We chatted with another live-aboard's guests — on the airplane on the way home — who missed half the stuff we ended up seeing because we had Hector and Ike. "Sweetie," the resident giant Napoleon wrasse at Blue Corner follows both guys around like a blue puppy; especially Hector, with whom she seems to be especially smitten. The photos and video of these encounters are wonderful. We had probably one of the best dives we've ever done at German Channel due to Ike; the cleaning station there became a bit boring once the single manta ray disappeared, so Ike swam off (as briefed he would do in this case) and came back a few minutes later to get our group. He led us into a bait ball, a dervish of swirling, feeding fish with sharks beneath us and manta rays sweeping the surface above. Fabulous and the majority of this dive was done in less than 25 feet. When we surfaced, the mantas, who appeared to be mating, were around the boat so we jumped back in with snorkels and masks and prolonged the awe. The mantas swam back and forth within touching distance. Those other live-aboard guests mentioned earlier — they never even saw a manta at German Channel or the Napoleon wrasses! Make sure Ike and Hector are working the week you book (the crew gets every 6th week off for vacation). Rose, another favorite crew member, made great desserts and kept the cabins immaculate. The rooms were nice; not too small but keep the wet gear out of them since they are carpeted and could get moldy. Our room was fine but some of the other rooms didn't smell so great,

we assume from previous guests and wet articles of clothing. Email access was down as was the photo processing but the crew happily shuttled photos to be developed to another boat via the skiff. The diving skiff is fast but it's being replaced by a newer, slower boat; too bad. The crew hands out warm, clean towels after each dive and when you use the fresh water shower on the dive deck on board. The top sundeck (with hammock), covered shade area, and lounge chairs were spacious. Hot tub small and not always very warm but still nice. Crew works hard, tip them well as we saw just how hard they push and still smile each morning at 5 a.m. Lorenza, a cute Italian female divemaster, had all our guys drooling; she was sweet and pretty — another reason the other live-aboard was jealous! Ulong Channel and docking at Ulong Beach were memorable: truly paradise. We dove Blue Corner three times; each time was different yet equally exciting. Reef sharks are plentiful and quite large; lost count of how many turtles we saw both small and gigantic; anemones were bursting with color and clownfish — photo ops endless here. You have to leave the ship at 8:00 a.m. on that last Sunday so spend this last day before the long plane ride home at Palau Pacific Resort: heaven on earth with palm trees and a salt water fish pond that is remarkable with turtles and stingrays. The *Aggressor* crew even arranged for their own private shuttle bus to take us to the airport at 12 a.m. from PPR; paid the driver a total of \$70 for all 16 of us, cheaper than what the PPR shuttle was charging. Also, to get a taste of where the locals and expatriates go, have din-

ner and drinks at Kramer's that last Saturday night, the only time dinner isn't served on the boat. The German owner, Renee, has great stories, so it's an entertaining way to end an unforgettable week of Palau diving. This was the dry season, which means it only rains a few inches less than the rainy season, so expect some rain and sun; bring a rain jacket for the boat rides and inland excursions and sweatshirts. I wish I had brought my 5-mm wetsuit, but my husband and others were comfortable in shorts or skins. We left some gifts for the crew; they were so grateful and appreciative we wish we had brought more for the girls. The entire crew really made our week the best it could ever have been, not only great diving but luxury and comfort on board!

Palau Aggressor, April 2003, Gary Ormand, Katy, TX. Dives logged: 1,000+. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 87 F. Dive restrictions enforced: depth and time. Coral is in terrible shape from El Nino bleaching. Although the *Aggressor* is a beautiful boat, the service and attitude of the crew were less than acceptable. Safety was lacking in several instances. No safety was unacceptable. Letter to *Aggressor* Headquarters has gone unanswered after a month. I felt like I had wasted my money and was ready to go home mid-week. The diving and the service sucked. Also, their 60-minute time limit is not acceptable. If I can make my air last longer, why should I be limited due to other air hogs?

Palau Aggressor, June 2003, Charles Wilson, Lincoln, NE. Vis:

Central & Western Pacific

30 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F. Experience: 600+ dives. Dive restrictions enforced: computer only. Very friendly and helpful boat staff and divemaster/dive guides. Best crew of any boat I've been on.

***Star Dancer*, March 2003, Tom and Donna Kelly, Irmo SC.** Experience: Each with more than 1,000 dives and both are PADI Divemasters. Water: calm and 80 F. 3mm wet suit was fine. From South Carolina to Palau is 21 hours of actual flying time, but you don't get back into a bed for 38 straight hours with lay over and plane changes. On the way home you see two sunrises. Instead of paying \$6,000 for two first class tickets, we purchased an extra seat between us for \$1,000. I was able to move to empty seat after the plane closed its door giving one of us a chance to sleep across the 3 seats. Always try to get a seat close to the front of the plane; you're first to get off through immigration. The first day you arrive at Palau Pacific Resort is at 10 p.m. on Continental Airlines. This is a nice place — everything first class. Request buildings 1, 2, 3, or 4, beach-front near the pool, diving, and lobby. You may want to get here a day earlier before *Star Dancer* leaves to give your luggage more time to arrive. The snorkeling in front of the Palau Pacific Resort is great, large clams, out further eagle rays, cuttle fish, yellow seashores, etc. The *Star Dancer* is not to return to Palau until December 2004 to January 2005. We had a standard room, #6. Try to get a master stateroom. The boat was usually moored at night so the huge "Owner Suite" in the bow might be OK,

i.e., no motion at night. Rooms have independent a/c, hair dryers, soap, shampoo, conditioner. The standard rooms were small, but you're only there to sleep. At night when the stars would come out it was beautiful to be on the sky deck in the South Pacific. Food on the *Star Dancer* was excellent. Dinners were especially wonderful, with the elegantly decorated tables, to the open bar (stocked with everything) and formally dressed stewards. The food was excellent. The diving was phenomenal. Hooking into the reef was a new experience. Blue Corner was our favorite dive; Jelly Fish Lake was the strangest dive, millions of these creatures floating around you and in your bathing suit. The wrecks were in the harbor, and visibility was bad, not good dives. The worst dive was at Peleliu cut. This was our first hook-in dive, and the current was ripping as I've never seen before. The cut is located at the most southern tip, which explains the current. One diver named Elisa hooked in at 70 feet, and the current was surging violently. She appeared to be whipping back and forth, up and down, and also her whole body was almost spinning right and left. She lost a fin, then a weight belt. The current "blew" her mask off. No one in the first group of divers could swim against the current to get to her; finally, Bhoiet was able to cut the hook-in cord and take her to the surface. It was like a washing machine in that area. We did CPR, Elisa's pulse and respiration returned, but she never regained consciousness. She passed away two days later in Guam. Carry a knife (to cut your hook-in cord) and think twice about this dive. The shore tour of the Battle of

Peleliu was great, do this one. This is a U.S. trust territory, so you can mail story boards home. It cost a premium, but Palau Pacific Resort will insure the boards if purchased through them. Go to the town jail for the best price, and bring your own package tape and buy cardboard from the hotel, send it on the airplane with you. While at the Palau Pacific Resort try Shark Attack drink and the Taro Leaf Soup. People told me bleaching had affected the coral, but I didn't see that.

(www.peterhughes.com)

Star Dancer, March 2003, Russ (Lippy18182@AOL.com), Sterling Hts., MI. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. This was the best live-aboard trip we have been on. The reefs were great. I think what made the trip was the boat crew and the weather. Peter Hughes did a first rate job in taking care of our comforts and safety. We didn't have strong currents, and the water conditions were calm. Not only did we get to the famous sites (Blue Corner, German Channel), they also took us to some sites we had asked to dive. Peleliu Wall was just spectacular — a true 10 dive. Great abundance of sea and coral life. We stopped in Hawaii to brake up the plane ride. We got to Palau early and stayed at the West Plaza Malakal to save a few bucks. Not as nice a Palau Pacific but only 70 bucks compared to 210 a night. It's also close to town and dive boats. Went on a day dive with FISH and FINS, and they treated us well. Warm water, high voltage diving with lots of big pelagics.

Truk

Truk Aggressor II, March 2003, John and Sandra Quick, Grand Rapids, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. We would have done this years ago if we knew how much fun a live-aboard could be. Captain Niall, first mate Tom, and photo pro Ed were stars, as were the rest of the crew. Everything seemed to go so smoothly, the crew worked nonstop to keep everyone happy. Where all the warm towels and snacks materialized from we will never know. The accommodations were adequate and clean but space for storing stuff was almost non-existent. Made it tough for us as we did have a bit of clothing and souvenirs with us as this was a multi destination trip. The crew stored our big bag which was a great help. Food was a good as could be expected given the remote locale. Tom was once a beverage/food director on a cruise ship so he helped in the kitchen with some tasty results. The public spaces were cozy and comfortable. As nonphotographers we enjoyed fellow passengers (and Ed) sharing slides and video with us in the evenings. The diving was awesome. Operation Hailstorm in Feb. of 1944 was a big coup for the U.S. Navy. Though there are few combatants on the bottom of Truk Lagoon, there are approximately 60 (every book gives a different number) merchants on the bottom and several aircraft. The shallow wrecks (150 and above) are, per those who have been here before, showing the effects of dive pressure. We were happy. Many identifiable fittings (guns, bridges, masts, kingposts,

gangways, ladders, props, etc.). Lots of cargo and other stuff to look at such as a tank on deck of one vessel, trucks in the hold of another, Japanese zeros in the hold of a vessel, etc. Sake bottles and ammunition galore. We were comfortable following Niall or Ed through compartments and into holds. Lots of gorgeous tropicals. Many masts, fittings, guns, etc., are beautifully encrusted with soft corals. The anemones alone were worth the price of admission (oh, and of course the clownfish in them). Saw quite a few sharks. There was a shark dive. We would have skipped it for another wreck dive. Overall experience rates an A from us! (www.aggressor.com)

Truk Aggressor, April 2003, Gary Ormand, Katy, TX. Dives logged: 1,000+. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. Best diving in 32 years of being in this sport. Fantastic crew, nice boat, great food. Shark dive was great! Wrecks are beautiful, lots of coral growth and fish. Fantastic night dives. Great divemasters/guides. No restrictions placed on time/depth — allowed experienced divers the freedom to dive within their own limits.

Truk Odyssey, February 2003, Mike Garrison (mgarrison@gbutler.com), Leawood, KS. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm. My first live-aboard experience. *Truk Odyssey* is clearly the elite of the Truk operations. Spacious cabins, large showers, roomy gear storage on dive deck, excellent dining and bar, and friendly and helpful crew. At each dive site a thorough as well as histori-

cal briefing of every wreck. A history lesson and it was outstanding diving. Guides were available if desired, and I used them on penetrations. Nitrox is included, and you need it if you want to stay long enough to see the entire wreck. Items were tanks, trucks, torpedoes, depth charges, sake bottles, periscopes, ammunition, galleys, engine rooms, heads (bathrooms), steering gear, pilot houses, and a lot more. Lenny runs an outstanding operation. In addition to 27 wreck dives in a week, we went to the reef and did a shark feeding dive and a reef dive. Also visited a small island and saw the Japanese installations from WWII. The crew handled all of our luggage from airplane to airplane, so no hassle. We didn't see any rain until the last day. The *Odyssey* is a remarkable vessel, well maintained and operated. Photographers were happy. (www.trukodyssey.com)

Truk Odyssey, June 2003, Terry Gee, El Paso, TX. Experience: Over 1,000 dives Vis: 25 to 50 feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. L.A. is the worst airport to fly through. Lines extended out the doors and down the street every place that you had to pass through. Three hours is the minimum time that you should give yourself to get through that mess. You pass through Guam; layovers are not exceptional and the customs and immigration is easy to deal with. The airport in Truk is more like an open warehouse so don't expect any amenities there like food or water. We stopped in Hawaii for two days on the return trip to make it a little less grueling. The *Odyssey* is one of the nicest

live-aboards that I have sailed on. The crew is helpful, knowledgeable and friendly. The diving is almost all wreck diving but the best there is. The rooms are very large and spacious, air-conditioned and well kept up. The food is great. The owner/capt and his wife make it a trip to remember.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Chertan, September 2002, Jim Jenkins (jajenkins@pacbell.net), Oakland, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, calm, choppy, no currents. On a one to 10 scale, 10 for muck lovers; 7 for big fish lovers. Visibility good to very good. Muck dives had 40 feet or better. Go for the macro critters and the smaller, more intimate boat. There is plenty of large fish life; this trip is for muck divers who also want some variety. About 50% of our diving was muck diving or on reef tops looking for critters. Dives on reefs in open ocean produced a few sharks, schools of barracuda, eagle rays, turtles, schools of bump-head parrots, and healthy fish life. From the boat, we saw dolphins, a whale shark, a dugong, a swordfish, and mola molas. Some coral bleaching; the reefs are recovering nicely with large fans, sea whips, abundant black corals, soft corals, etc. Reef fish are healthy and diverse. While we didn't see everything (no leaf scorpion or lacy scorpion fish), we saw a great variety of exotic nudibranchs, ghost pipefish, snake eels, crocodile fish, scorpion fish, lion fish, blue-ribbon eels, numerous small shrimps and crabs, etc. Surprises like the wondrous melibe nudibranchs

(three of them feeding, one nearly 12 feet long) occurred on nearly every muck dive. Rob knows the sites intimately and excels at finding things. He dives most dives and is happy to guide you. The briefings were good. Generally good food with some delicious meals. Cabin space was adequate and similar to most smaller boats. Two heads (with showers) on the main deck, shared by all guests. A/C is a single unit under the stairs for all 6 units. Nice lounge area, adequate space for sunning and shade above decks. The boat is wide for its size. 80% of the diving is from the stern with side and up two sets of steps in the rear. No crowding and easy entries and exits. This is the most relaxed type of unlimited diving since you go in when you want, and come back to the boat when you want (although the crew keeps watch and will pick you up in the tender if you want). A few current dives on reefs were from the zodiac. No EAN. There is a large table above decks for cameras. The crew carries cameras up to the table after rinsing and will fetch them back down for you if you're lazy. Rob makes the trip fun and productive. Rooms are not made up daily. (www.chertan.com)

Chertan, December 2002, David McKowen, Andalusia, AL.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The best dive boat in the world. I just completed my six or seventh trip on the *Chertan* in PNG. Rob Vanderloos, the owner-captain, is an enthusiastic diver and videographer. Rob is always ready to dive and point out interesting critters.