

drying cameras. E6 processing available on board, but we had to mount our own. Two divers reported that their last two roles were ruined by negligent processing. Instructor Annie Crawley, an accomplished underwater photographer and videographer was incredibly helpful, making suggestions above/below the water, reviewing our slides, and allowing us to use her expensive equipment. I learned more from her in a week than from all other trips combined.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Bilikiki, November 2002, Wuni Ryschkewitsch, Gainesville, FL.

Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 80 F. Dives logged: 3,350. Excellent crew, excellent boat, tinny easy to dive from and get into. I have hip and knee replacements and need some help and got it every time. Very good operation all around and a friendly crew. Eleven crew, eight divers.

(www.bilikiki.com)

Bilikiki, August 2003, Jan Breidenbach (aquafauna@aol.com),

Granite Bay, CA. Dives logged: 800+. Vis: 75-90 ft. Water: 80-85 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 120 ft. How easy dive life can be! Diving from the "tinnies" meant no surface swims. Wonderfully laid out dive deck, camera area, great staff. Excellent dive guides for novice and expert divers. Friendly local people — natural beauty. Solomon Is. doesn't deserve travel advisory. It is great there.

Spirit of the Solomons, September

2003, Nikki Mahann (nikkim@oz.net), Bellevue, WA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. We were disappointed as far as seeing pelagics, only a lone shark or turtle showed up. The macro was very good. The sea fans and soft corals are magnificent. We used reef hooks on several of the strong current dives, what a great way to watch the huge schools of jacks, tuna and barracudas! We searched for the seahorse but didn't see one. I was lucky to see the elusive shrimp gobie on a dive at White Beach. The crew couldn't have been better which compensated for the age of the boat. Meals were plentiful and satisfied the needs of the health conscious eaters as well as the picky ones.

(www.bilikiki.com)

TONGA

Ha'apai

Nai'a, August 2003, John Sommerer, Silver Spring, MD.

Previous diving Caribbean, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Micronesia, PNG. 250-500 dives. Sunny, cloudy, windy. Calm & flat, choppy, currents, no currents. 73-75 deg. F. 3mm wetsuit. Vis: 40-100 ft. Dive own profile. Dive guides had a tendency to urge you to come up after about 50 minutes if they could find you. Great facilities. Ten of sixteen passengers were UWPs, and each had more than one camera. Plenty of workspace, charging capacity, etc. The film photographers had a bad day when a whole batch of E6 went bad, but Rob Barrel

made substantial amends to those affected. *Nai'a* is a fantastic operation, with outstanding crew and amenities. Every crew member memorable (in a good way) as an individual. Owner Rob a superb host. About half the passengers were repeaters. This was a humpback whale expedition. Based on Barrel's testimony, one of the best ever. We sighted 105 whales, and swam with 30. Some encounters were brief, but three lasted for hours. One involved three to seven whales for 3 hours in the water. When the swimmers were exhausted and left the water, the whales circled the boat, seeming to ask, "why don't you want to play anymore?" Barrel's philosophy of finding "curious whales," rather than harassing those that are not interested in interacting, pays off. But the whales set the agenda. Our best encounters were after many shorter or unsuccessful tries, when I was dry, warm, and clean, and expected not to go in the water again. My wife and I went in every time there was a chance to swim. You don't know what the schedule is going to be every day. The asst. chef emerged from the galley once at noon to say, "lunch is ready to be served — let the whales know that they can come now." Surface observation and photography of the whales is also fascinating — a nonswimmer might even enjoy this trip. There were one or two dives every day, some outstanding, some mediocre (depending on where we found ourselves in late afternoon). Few big fish. Some good night dives, but with hours in cold water with the whales during the day-time, we missed some. 5mm wetsuits

recommended by *Nai'a* are good for diving, but slow you down when you swim with whales. With steady trade winds, winter can get downright cold on deck. Barrel was good at guiding guests' behavior with whales, but inevitably there are aggressive photos pushing to the front, leaving wakes of bubbles for you to photograph, rather than whales. When the whales get comfortable, free diving produces superior photographs, but diving before the whales are "ready" pretty much guarantees their departure. Fewer people in the water increases the probability of a long interaction. Tonga is an interesting place that's frustrating to get to. Royal Tongan Airlines changes their schedule capriciously — don't cut your schedule too close!
(www.naia.com.fj)

***Nai'a*, September 2003, Doris & Bob Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net), Fallbrook, CA.** Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 72 to 74 F, calm, no currents. The *Nai'a* which usually operates in Fijian waters goes to Tonga for six weeks each year for the humpback whale migration. This is the second time we have done this whale trip (third trip on *Nai'a*) and it is outstanding. Mostly we snorkel with the whales although sometimes it is possible to see them on scuba. Once the whales are spotted, the crew maneuvers the big boat or the skiffs toward the whales where we are able to slip into the water to observe and swim with them up close. Lots of moms and calves as well as large males. When there were no whale

sightings, we dove on various reefs and they were good dives but seemed so “ho hum” after swimming with the whales! Night dives were offered each night and were pretty good. The crew of the *Nai’a* is absolutely outstanding and incredibly attentive. The rooms are large and comfortable and the food is gourmet — served meals with a choice of two entrees for breakfast and lunch and three at dinner. Host Rob

Barrel is knowledgeable and being on the *Nai’a* with him is a real learning experience. Remarkable trip I describe as “days of leisure, hours of ecstasy!” *Nai’a* has a separate dry room for photographic equipment immediately adjacent to the dive deck with 3 levels of shelves and large enough for 8 photographers at one time with more than adequate secure and dry electrical connections for charging.

Planning a Trip?

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