

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.

Water: 68 to 70 F, calm, surge. This trip was to see great white sharks from cages. Chumming was done from morning until night and people were encouraged to fish (equipment provided) when not diving. The sharks put in some cage-rattling appearances, tearing a hole in a float on one cage, taking 2 bites out of a surfboard used as a “decoy”, bending in a cage bar so much that the welding attaching it to the frame broke, taking out all four air hoses in one cage with a single bite, and routinely bumping and biting the cages. There were 2 cages in the water at a time with 4 divers in each cage. Weight harnesses were supplied, no need for fins, BCs or snorkles, bring own wet suit and hood (we were told that temperatures are usually in the mid 60 F). Air is supplied from the boat via hoses that go to regulators in the cages. When the sharks were around time flew by. In 4 days of diving we had one cage rotation when no sharks showed — that was a long and boring hour. Most times the vis was about 100 ft, however one afternoon everything from about 8 ft down became milky and the sharks seemed to just suddenly be at the cages. There were times when you could see the fin above the murk coming towards the cage and then suddenly the whole shark was right in front of us. The boat and diving were run efficiently and the crew was upbeat, courteous and friendly. Chef Mark made delicious and varied meals, often grilling on deck. Food varied from salads to fresh tuna to steak to chicken, etc. Desserts were store bought. Snacks

were always available. Special needs were accommodated. Beer and wine was included in the price of trip, mixed drinks (delicious) were extra. Your dive day ended with your first alcoholic drink. The salon was not air conditioned, only had 2 windows that could be opened and quickly became hot during dinner hours. No frills boat. There are two heads — both on the main deck. There were 16 divers and 10 crew and this was not a major problem. There is also a hot water, open-air shower for rinsing after dives. Bring your own towels. There are no port holes on the lower level where the cabins are. The cabins are clean but extremely tiny. Each has 2 bunks with reading lights and the smallest 3 drawer night stand imaginable. There are 4 hooks and a mirror on the wall. One of us would get up and dress then leave the cabin so there would be room for the other person to dress. It would be a good idea to bring a hanger for hanging wet suits on the main deck. At the end of the dive day the crew will take wet suits to engine room for drying overnight and towels will be put in the dryer. A superb opportunity to see these sharks up close and personal! Rinse tank and shelves for storing cameras. Crew reminded divers not to use camera rinse tank for masks, etc. Most divers were photographers — on the trip to get pictures of the great whites. Shelf space was adequate, but a little more camera space would be nice. At night many worked in the salon on their digital photography. There was room to recharge batteries, etc. (www.horizoncharters.com)

Iron Eagle, July 2002, Marilyn

Allen, CO. I put together a trip at a local dive shop for instructors and assistants. First it was scheduled over Labor Day. Since it had been confirmed with the boat owner, many of us bought non-refundable air tickets and planned vacations. Thirty people signed up. The owner called in May to change the date because the boat was going to be in Mexico. Said he'd give us a great deal (he did discount his price by \$200) because he wanted our business. Now, however, the group is eighteen because people couldn't rearrange their vacations. No minimum was guaranteed, however. Two weeks before the trip, he called the shop to cancel, because his assistant hadn't been able to fill the boat (supposedly held 30). The dive shop had already purchased our non-refundable air tickets, to the tune of \$4,000! After much discussion and his stating that the shop could probably sue him and win but he didn't care, the four owners of the shop kicked in additional money out of their own pockets (the rest of us didn't know about this until the end of the trip) to make the trip a go. Divemaster Shawn was personable, competent, and worked hard to please. However, when the crane used to lift the dingy started shooting sparks all over the upper deck, we had some concerns. Three of five lights in our four-person bunk room were out. Replaced three bulbs myself, but top light never did work; main deck toilet didn't flush most of the time; downstairs toilet over flowed several times causing the carpet in the lower level bunk area to smell like urine; all the

fresh (?) water smelled like gasoline, especially nice when showering; the hot tub worked only one day, then it smelled of gasoline, at least until the captain decided to pour two bottles of bleach and a little detergent into it — then we had a tub full of foam that smelled like bleach and gasoline. The boat ran out of napkins, toilet paper, fresh drinking water, and didn't have a cook for first three days so captain did the cooking (food was basic at best, although a bit better when the "cook" came on board). Never had a dessert (on a dive boat? you've got to be kidding), the boat was dirty throughout, bathroom showers had orange and black mold around them, thick scum caked on shower doors and walls, dirty carpets and group room, needed paint, had trim falling off the walls so nails and screws were sticking out (a nice hazard when the boat was rocking), the "water toys" that were promised on the website (jet ski, wave runner, sea kayaks) were nonexistent, the only seating on the deck consisted of flimsy plastic chairs that tended to collapse if they'd been in the sun too long, there were no lounge chairs, the only place to lie in the sun was on the dirty, rough steel deck. One side of the boat had tank racks, the other side had a rope drawn from one end to the other, and twice tanks fell out; captain didn't keep up with Nitrox fills. I am a PADI Dive Master who has over 400 blue water dives and have dived in many places in the world. This is the worst operation I have encountered. This piece of trash is planning to move to Baja, Cabo, or La Paz.
(www.diveironeagle.com)

Searcher, Great White Adventures, October 2002, John Kontnik, Lakewood, CO. 5-day trip with Great White Adventures and had quite an adventure. We left San Diego about 10:00 am and made the trip to a small island 215 miles WSW of San Diego (roughly 155 W of the nearest point of Baja). Guadeloupe was our destination, an uninhabited island with only a temporary Mexican fishing camp, but this is where the great whites were supposed to be. Diving is cage diving as chumming is constantly going on. On our first day we had several encounters that may have lasted 15-20 minutes. On day two there were no encounters but we had some great interactions with curious blues. They would swim right through the cages. On day three whites were around all day from before 7:00 am until we had to leave the site at 5:30 pm. One time we counted six around the cages, it was common to see two or three at a time. There are two cages in the water at all times that can handle four divers each and photo equipment comfortably and you get to occupy the cages in 45 minute shifts so there is plenty of water time. The 95-ft fishing boat *Searcher* is somewhat cramped with small double occupancy cabins and four shared heads. The crossing lasts 22 hours so hope for calm seas, which we had on the way out but it was rough on the way back. You cannot go on the island, which is very arid as it is part of Mexico. This is not a pretty trip as all you will probably see are sharks and there is no diving outside the cage but if you want to see whites without going to South Africa or Australia here is a

great opportunity. The length of the interactions was truly unbelievable. When you are not in the cages it is almost as thrilling to watch the sharks on the surface from the top deck. You do not use tanks you use a hooka. (www.greatwhiteadventures.com/guadalupe.html)

As an

undercurrent

subscriber

you're entitled to a

**FREE
MONTHLY
EMAIL**

with inside information,
latest updates, diving
news and tips that
don't appear in
the printed newsletter.

Sign up at
www.undercurrent.org
today!
