

stay. For those that are on a budget, a block back from the beach you can get an A/C room for \$10 US a night. With in 2 blocks of the hotel there are at least 50 places to eat. the food is cheap and lots of it. The average dinner with one beer was \$3 US. The dive shop and boats are well run. They try hard to accommodate each diver. They offer slower day dive boats or speedboats that go to dive sites that the slower boat will not. The air temp avg. 95 degrees. The water was just starting to warm up, 80 on the surface and as cold as 74 degrees at 75 feet. Visibility was poor lots of silt in the water. Up close to the reef visibility was good enough to take pictures. No big fish. Only small fish and the reefs that are protected are in good shape. A lot of the reefs have fishing damage. There are lots of small critters to see and take pictures of. If you are into macro pictures you will love this place. Also Rainbow Divers offers two other dive sites Whale Island and Phu Quoc Island.

Indian Ocean & Red Sea Live-Aboards

CAMBODIA

Scuba Nation, January 2004, Jan R. Shaw, Seattle, WA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, currents. Scuba Nation in Sihanoukville, Cambodia has been in operation for about two years. We chose the two day five dives (one a night dive) live-aboard as opposed to the closer in (two and a half hour boat trip to the site)

day diving. Scuba Nation was quite upfront that the waters any closer to Sihanoukville would not be good diving. They said that a cab would pick us up at our hotel the next morning and take us to the boat dock. Please note Scuba Nation is a cash only no credit cards US dollars please operation. The dive boat is a converted Khmer fishing boat. Those boats have a flat roof. There was an arched canvas area up on the roof for us to sleep and stay out of the sun during the 4 or 5 hours it took to get to Koh Tang island. We slept on the kind of lounge chairs you'd use for sunning in your own backyard. Two of the five people on the trip were over six feet tall, so they were longer than the lounge chairs. We were advised not to sleep on the flat deck/roof of the boat as there was rain most evenings. The bathroom is a hole in the deck. The Vietnamese captain doubled as the cook. Food was plain but plentiful, lots of fruit, tea/coffee water and soda. Beer was extra. There was a compressor on board. The gear was of Thai manufacture and fairly new. The diving was lead by a Divemaster with a divemaster trainee as an assistant. For the first dive the DM trainee went over the side twice to verify the location of the boat and the speed of the current. If he couldn't make it back to the boat it was judged to be too much current. Due to this current on the first dive not all divers made it to the bottom in the same location. After waiting for ten minutes between two rocks on the bottom at 45 feet three of us plus the Divemaster continued the dive. The visibility ranged from 15-25 feet. Lots of back scatter. The bottom was rocky with some coral. The fish were mostly

small but some were up to 5 inches in length. The dive turned into a drift dive which reminded one diver of Cozumel for it's speed. When we surfaced the other couple and the DM trainee were on the surface having completed their own dive. The second dive was similar except this time we also swam into the same current in order to do a safety stop at 20 feet. It was close to 5 pm so the visibility was dropping. I did see several nudibranchs and a seasnake. We were moored in the middle of four fishing boats for the evening. I skipped the night dive which was about 30 minutes in duration and judging from the post dive chatter still a lot of current and two eels at a new site about 30 feet in depth. The next day we did the before breakfast dive off the same island. Still swimming into current. The visibility was good about 25-30 feet One couple got separated from the group and surfaced alone as a buddy team sharing air with their alternative air source. Two of the other three divers made their drifting safety stop with less than 50 bar (500 psi) of air. Our chase boat was delayed in picking us up as the main boat had just been boarded by five members of the Cambodian navy who left half an hour after we had reboarded, clutching their bribe of beer and cigarettes. We then moved to a different island and dove a pristine site. The DM did not even know the name of the island. The last dive was another drift dive but it was the best dive of the trip. The visibility remained good there was lots of coral for the entire dive and the greatest number of fishes seen on the trip. However all of the divers were slowing down due to the need to swim into the

current in order for the divemaster to get up to 20-25 feet for a safety stop before we all did the drifting stop. It was a quiet lunch and five hour boat ride back to Sihanoukville. If you are out in Southeast Asia and want to go diving you take what there is. Just remember that not all live-aboards are of the Aggressor/Peter Hughes class, but then one would not expect that in a country that just regained it's feet politically in 1997 or so. Note: After we arrived back at the Scuba Nation dive shop riding with all the gear in the back of a pickup over a dirt road we were asked to pay for both that truck ride and the cab that had transported us to the dock the first morning. No, I didn't buy a T-shirt. (www.divecambodia.com)

INDONESIA

Komodo

Adventure Komodo, January 2004, Jerry Tuttle (milo3@cox.net) Phoenix, AZ. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, no currents. This is the most comfortable boat that I have dived from. Food was gourmet, with the presentation of a five star restaurant. Staff was super friendly and helpful. Dive crew under the supervision of Larry Smith was terrific. He can always find the most unusual and surprising critters. I saw critters that I have never seen before and probably will never see again. Our trip left from Bali and traveled through Komodo and on to Kupang on Timor where we left the boat and flew back to Bali. The only disappointing aspect of the trip

was the fish bombing damage in what was once the pristine reefs of Sumba and Savu. I could not continue on as the boat made its way to Raja Ampat in Irian Jaya. Boat a little crowded if all divers are photographers, but the crew was putting some thought into better accommodating photographers. No E-6 processing, welcome to the digital age. (www.adventureh2o.com)

Grand Komodo Tours, May 2004, Fred Turoff (fturoff@temple.edu) Philadelphia, PA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 83 F, calm, currents. At \$1225 for 8 days, 7 nights, this is a terrific deal. The diving was often in pristine areas with no other boats. Our passenger total was only 4, yet the boat went out with 8 crew. The divemaster, Chris, gave detailed briefings and found many creatures for our viewing. Although big animals were scarce — we saw fewer than 10 sharks during the week, two mantas where the water was cool (77 degrees) and soupy with plankton (good for them, bad for photos), several large Napoleon wrasse and other large fish, but not in schools — there were so many smaller creatures to dazzle our eyes. Lots of nudibranchs — including Spanish dancers on 2 night dives, cuttlefish both day and night, 2 frogfish, 3 pygmy seahorses on one fan, a reef stonefish, ball of striped catfish at night, blue ribbon eel, ghost pipefish (once), octopi, leaf scorpionfish, crocodilefish, decorator and hermit crabs with anemone cities on their backs, several turtles, clown triggerfish, anemonefish galore. Healthy coral of so many varieties covered with

smaller reef fish. Some sites were so beautiful, I just stopped and marveled at them, especially with overhead sunlight. Protected sites were generally calm or light current. However, two ocean sites (not by islands) had strong currents which blew me off the sites, so I wound up in blue water for a while. But the skiff driver always found me quickly (DiveAlert helped). I'm thin, so I was most comfortable in a light fleece vest with hood and 5 mm body suit in the warmer water (80+), but I used a 6mm hood in cooler water. The crew was caring and helpful. 3-4 dives per day is the norm. A between-dive trip to Komodo National Park allowed us to see the dragons up close and to see native flora and fauna as we toured a bit with a guide. For evening entertainment, bring some DVDs you want to see, as their selection was limited and mostly bootleg it seemed. We had fresh fish thanks to crew- fishermen several days, plus fresh squid as we were near the squid-fishing fleets twice. The first day I noticed a diesel smell in the cabin area, but not much afterward (maybe I got used to it). I slept in my cabin only the first night, after which I settled on a mattress with a blanket on the upper deck in 77 degree air with a light breeze. The captain turned off the lights, so it was me and the southern stars — no moon until morning, so the sky was magnificent. After the trip my dive-buddy and I did a day tour around Bali and were amazed at the craftsmanship of so many natives. Bali is hurting for tourists, so bargains were abundant. We stayed at the beautiful Kartika Hotel in Denpasar, a fine value. UW

Photography Comments: The boat needs more table room if many are UWP. Two rinse tanks dedicated to cameras is always ready. Crew handled cameras well. No onboard developing, but digital and video were reviewed immediately after dives. Recharging stations are available (220v). (www.komodoalordive.com)

Grand Komodo Tours and Dives, August 2004, Stephen Green (Healing@warwick.net), Goshen, NY. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 75 to 81 Ft, calm, currents. First class company in service and experience. The small vessels are classic Indonesian wooden designs with 5-6 clean cabins on each boat with clean ensuite bathrooms (cold to warm showers, hot shower on the after deck) and 3 of 4 vessels have individual A/C (*Putra Papua*, max 10 divers) and *Temu Kira* (max 12 divers). There is a lounge and a deck to sun on each boat. These “boutique dive boats” are wholly adequate and clean. I had a problem with A/C and spiked 220 Electric on *Temu Kira*. 16 day 15 night tour of the Alor group of islands in Far eastern Indonesia (didn't see another dive boats) and then 8 days in the Komodo/Rinca Island group. Both areas are superb diving, though occasionally challenging currents. 4 dives daily incl. night dive w/a few days fewer (50+ dives for the trip) Dives ranged from many walls, slopes, pinnacles, and some sandy reef areas—a real variety of u/w terrain. Some equipment available to cover failures. Night lights for rent. 3000+ fills + quick repair. Relaxed, no hassle diving with plenty

of independence for the “go it alone” photographer (who wants one for a buddy anyway). No Nitrox. The food was good, mostly Indonesian, but not too spicy. Lots of vegetables, rice and fish and chicken. Fruit smoothies, good salads. Lots of fruit always with breads. Hot pound cakes between dives and eggs at breakfast as well with a rough bacon. Always enough food. Beer and sodas at nominal cost. BYOB hard liquor and wine. Always drink bottled water and use it for tooth brushing. Indonesian dive guides were excellent and pointed out and found incredible fish, critters, and weird forms of life which makes this region famous. Personal requests were gracefully honored and help with dive equipment, cameras, etc. was always available. On the *Putra Papua* (Normally you spend the entire trip on 1 boat, but a mechanical problem required picking up the *TemuKira* before Komodo) all diving is from Zodiac (very easy) while ? of dives on the *TemuKira* could be done off the stern (easy steps down to surface) or a similar skiff. Since we dove in groups of 4-5—no crowding and easy grouping, even in high current areas. The flora and fauna are incredible in diversity, health of reefs, remarkable numbers. Saw well over 200 species including “clouds”, “tons” and “myriads” of surgeonfish, triggers, butterfly, chromis, angels, sergeants silversides, bannerfish, anthias of myriad colors. Large schools of fusiliers, snappers, giant trevallies, tuna, Timor sea perch, unicorns, as well as jacks, Every dive revealed many frogfish, lions and scorpion fish with batfish, stonefish, floun-

ders, stargazers, gobies, 25 varieties of nudibranch and many sea worms, banded sea snakes. Most dives revealed a shark or two including the prized Wobbegong, bamboo shark, black and white tips, tigers and a few nurse sharks. One site in Komodo we saw huge mantas cruising within feet, eagle rays and blue spotted rays. Some barracuda, huge groupers and huge snappers. And of course ghost pipe fish, several remarkable octopus, amazing decorator crabs and incredible anemones with resident fish. Saw little of the pygmy sea horse, The hard coral exhibited no bleaching and the variety and health of the species was remarkable. Great varieties of crinoids of every color (cover up ankles and hands) Soft corals of every variety and color, particularly around Cannibal Rock in Komodo were stupendous along with the amazing macro life here (it can be a cold 70 here. Relaxed ambience and good service. Side trip to "dragons" and villages, and additional tours available on Bali. Flights to Komodo and Alors are simple and don't worry about the overage for luggage, GK makes it reasonable. komodoalordive.com. Anytime of the year is good. Photography Comments: Facilities were adequate with careful handling of equipment by crew and separate tanks. Plenty of places for charging stations including cabin, but wise to have good transformer for 220 on board. TV/DVD/CD + jacks to view photos available. Camera table adequate for at least 6-8 camera rigs.

Kararu, October 2003, Walter Brenner, Wayne, PA. Vis: 50-100

feet. Water: 78-80 F. Seeing the dragons was a plus. Diving to and from Bali, just so-so, but at the islands around Komodo it was tops. Cannibal Rock and Horseshoe Bay among the worlds top ten! A whole day of interacting with mantas, crystal clear water, tiny critters — nudis, crabs, rare Scorpion fish, Frog Fish — too numerous and awesome to count. (www.kararu.com)

Kararu, June 2004, Sean Bruner (sean@bruner.net) Tucson, AZ.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 150 Feet. Water: 74 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Left Benoa Harbor on Bali for 11 day cruise, 10 2 days diving. Beautiful weather. The boat was large, as was the crew. Cabin had a large king bed which took up almost the entire cabin. Storage underneath and in a small closet. Larger bags were stored in engine room. Two days out to Komodo National Park, a world heritage site, with a short stopover the second day off of Flores Island for two dives. The dives in the park were spectacular, with a large variety of healthy, colorful soft and hard coral. Excellent macro life, with many varieties never before seen. Exotics included frogfish, leaf scorpion fish, crocodile fish, pygmy seahorses, ghost pipe fish, and numerous tiny crabs, shrimp and lobster. The dives on the northern part of the park were warm with excellent visibility. The dives on the southern part were cold with less viz (30') but incredible critters. I took a 3/2 wetsuit and hood/vest and a 7/5 wetsuit and am glad I did. Large crew equaled the 18 guests. The boat was comfortable,

except on the two day ride back to Bali when diesel fumes overpowered the lower cabins, forcing many guests to sleep in the lounge or on deck. There are two cabins on the upper deck; ask for those when you book.. The dive guides were helpful, but not great, nor was there much outside help with photography, although there were so many photographers on board that help was available. The lounge had a great library and many DVD's and some videos, although the video recorded kept conking out. The food varied from good to mediocre. The breakfasts were average, eggs, pancakes, French toast, bacon, Indonesian noodles (packaged), croissants and fresh fruit. The coffee was strong, the tea not so great. Lunch often consisted of creative leftover preparation from the previous dinner. Desserts at lunch were fruit. Dinners started with good soup and offered a choice of several entrees, mostly beef or chicken done to an ethnic theme (Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, etc.) with a couple of nights offering fish. a vegetarian would have no problem. The food was filling, if often uninspired. The desserts were so bad that they often went uneaten. The chocolate mousse was an exception. Tony, one of the owners, was on board ; he was humorous and always eager to talk to the guests and make them feel welcome. He gave up his upper deck cabin on the last two nights to passengers overcome by fumes and he slept on the deck. The English divemaster, Linda, was warm and friendly. The Indonesian divemaster, Seno, was good at finding things in the water. Indonesian crew were all friendly and extremely help-

ful, but with their limited English, were hard to converse with. Except for the fumes and food, this is the best live-aboard I've been on (and the food wasn't really so bad). Diving was the best I've experienced. Long camera table with secured cabinets underneath. Compressed air for drying. Two separate rinse tanks. E6 processing. Battery charging station with three or four 110 volt power strips. Little professional help or tips from staff, but plenty from other passengers.

Komodo Dancer, May 2004, Frank Arroyo (frankandrenie@earthlink.net) McMinnville, OR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 82 F, calm. Great dive trip! Crew was outstanding! Great weather except for rain the last two days. Boat layout in common areas was good, but below deck guest quarters were cramped. The boat did spring some leaks once it started raining. Book the owner's cabin (we did). Good and plentiful food and fabulous service. All drinks, including alcohol and soda, are included. fantastic soft and hard corals as well as tropical fish and small unusual critters. No big stuff. We saw all kinds of beautiful nudibranchs and flatworms, harlequin ghost pipefish, pigmy sea horses, mantis shrimp, leaf scorpion fish, frog fish, every imaginable scorpion fish, demon stingers, harlequin shrimp, huge Spanish dancers with their imperial shrimp, arrow crabs, shrimp gobies with their colorful shrimp, sea apples, sea cucumbers, Coleman shrimp and zebra crabs on fire urchin, white eyed eels, snake eels, blueribbon eels, stargazers, mimic octopus. Spend some

time on Bali. Their tourist trade dropped close to zero after the Kuta bombings. We bought all kinds of great stuff at good prices. Bring simple stuff for the crew; hats, T-shirts, shorts, old dive equipment are genuinely appreciated. (www.peterhughes.com)

Komodo Dancer, June 2004, Jack Gibson, Dallas, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 82 F. Outstanding trip. The boat is stable and comfortable and the food was good. An excellent and sizeable crew of Indonesians took care of our every need — including shoulder massages after every dive! The divemasters were good about pointing out leaf fish, ornate ghost pipe fish, frog fish, squat lobster, pygmy seahorses, etc. Macrophotography heaven. Bali was an interesting and lovely place with friendly people. You feel safe there - don't let geopolitical concerns keep you from going. Typical Peter Hughes set up with separate rinse tanks and photo table.

Komodo Dancer, June 2004, Mario Mizrahi (mmizrahi@avantel.net) Mexico City, Mex. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 85 F, calm..Bali is a wonderful and fascinating place filled with warm and peaceful people, most Hindus, as opposed to Muslims for the rest of Indonesia. Tourism has suffered since the terrorist attack that left more than 200 dead 2 years ago, but security is good nowadays with authorities watchful of one of their main sources of income. Prices range from cheap to reasonable. Spent 3 days touring religious and natural sites. The *Komodo Dancer*

is a sailboat for 14 divers and as many as 16 crew members. We had 4 dive-masters: Gerry from England, Susan from Germany, Yan from Indonesia and Gillian from Scotland), all knowledgeable in finding the best stuff, especially Yan. You sail 22 hours to get to the first dive site, the second day we arrived in the island of Komodo, went ashore and saw Komodo Dragons in the wild as well as deer, wild boar, lovely orchids, etc. The diving in the Flores Sea was magnificent with a mix of small stuff and some pelagics, an albino manta ray, anemones with many different species of clownfishes, blue spotted fantail ray, batfish, lionfish, titan triggerfish, clown triggerfish, frogfish, whitetip sharks, barracuda, spiny lobster, stonefish, leaf scorpionfish, hawksbill turtles, humphead parrotfish, colorful nudibranchs, giant trevally, crocodilefish, cuttlefishes who changed shape and colors in a matter of seconds. At one memorable night dive we saw ornate ghost pipefish, flat-head stargazer, snake eel, mantis shrimp, octopus, mandarin fish and a baby cuttlefish. This place reminds me a little of Milne Bay in PNG plus the abundant turtles and large pelagics. Service was amazing; they even had a crew member who specialized in massages; food was good and varied especially the Indonesian fare which was good for our Mexican tastes — spicy. I was impressed by the maintenance, cleanliness of the ship. Ample space outside for storage of cameras. Inside charging facilities. Crew was conformable with handling of cameras and photographic equipment.

Sea Safari, Kararu Dive Voyages, November 2003, Kathleen Hedde (kdhedde@mindspring.com) San Jose, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Our first trip on the *Sea Safari/Kararu* had been in November 2001. This was Digital Photo Seminar, and the boat and the operation had still improved over the last two years. The boat is a wooden Pinisi schooner. One difference to other great live-aboards is the spacious layout in common areas, everybody will be able to find enough space to stretch out. Everything is kept very clean and well maintained. Laundry is done for very reasonable prices. The chef, Didi, doubles as the massage therapist — 1 hour for US \$10. 5 meals/snacks a day, and again, Didi does an incredible job of creating a wide and tasty variety of dishes. A cold breakfast before the first dive, then a hot breakfast with a wide selection from “eggs your style” to Indonesian dishes. At lunch, there are several dishes to choose from, typically curries, sates, stir-fries, a salad, cold cuts and fruit. A snack after the third dive. Dinner has a different theme every night, e.g., Thai, Chinese or Greek. On two nights, we also had very nice barbecues outside on the bridge deck. Crew has a great attitude, is friendly and genuinely interested in making the cruise a pleasant experience for the guests. The crew will take turns to help the guests suit up and carry cameras to the tender boats. The boat drivers are well trained in assisting divers into the water, as well as picking everybody quickly after the dive. I never had to wait for more than a minute until a boat came for me.

Nitrox is available. Cruise directors Linda and Carl were doing a great job of laying out the itinerary, adjusting it to accommodate special requests. The best diving is in Komodo National Park, with its healthy and diverse reef systems, and the full array of the exotic macro life that this area is famous for. Inside the park, the gem is Horseshoe Bay. Favorite dive sites are the Yellow Wall o' Texas, Cannibal Rock and Grandma Bang's Bommies. The incredible bio-diversity is fueled by the cool and nutrient-rich waters in this area. Water temperatures are frequently in the mid-seventies, and visibility may be somewhat limited (40-50 feet is considered a really good day. But for us California divers, that's a great day anytime!). No matter what the conditions, Komodo remains one of the most bio-diverse areas on the planet and offers some of the best diving out there. The stay in the park also includes a guided land tour to see the Komodo Dragons with great photo opportunities. Outside the park, the water is generally warmer, and the visibility will improve. Manta Alley: encounters with multiple mantas, sometimes up to 10 in the vicinity. Black Magic and Small World are truly reminiscent of Lembeh Strait, both for the variety and critters, as well as for the black sand bottom. The digital underwater photo seminar was taught by: Jim Watt, with an extensive digital background (www.wattstock.com), Berkeley White from Backscatter UW Photo and Video (www.backscatter.com) and Dan Baldocchi from Light and Motion (www.uwimaging.com). Light and Motion provided full configura-

tions of Tetra/Olympus housings, as well as the Titan/D100 housing and assorted lenses and dome ports. The seminars, nightly guest slide shows and individual photo critique provided a very efficient learning environment for beginners and more advanced shooters alike (I had been shooting digital for 2 years). Jim's, Berkeley's and Dan's experience with image pre- and post-processing and presentation was invaluable. You can check them out at the photo gallery on Kararu's website (www.kararu.com). Quite a few of the images were taken by guests who had done no or a minimal amount of UW photography before. This just goes to show how much digital UW speeds up the learning curve, especially in combination with high-quality instruction, and ample dive opportunities. Kararu plans to offer them again next year, on two cruises (Bali-Alor, Alor-Bali). Large rinse tanks on the boat, but not rinse facilities on the tender boats. Reasonable space for stowing photo gear, charging facilities crowded but enough outlets for everybody (110V and 220V). (www.kararu.com)

Sea Safari III, Kararu Dive Voyage, October 2003, Peter Hartlove, Longmont, CO. Dives logged: 600+. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 77-83 F. Close to perfect. 9 of us friends, a single guy and a couple from Belgium rounded it out. We were 4 short of a full boat so lots of room and later in the trip when people sat out dives, sometimes there was only the divemaster and 2 or 3 others in the transport boat. There were 4 photographers and a videographer, so the camera table/work area was never

crowded. If the majority of a full boat were photographers, it would be very close. Had flooding of a brand new digital camera housing and a flash on the trip. Fortunately, my housing and flashes worked flawlessly. They offered 36 dives over 10 days and somehow, I was able to get in 38. (36 rolls of film) No limits were placed on anyone, assuming we were experienced. They did watch over everyone at first and learned that the Belgian woman would be harmful to the reef at night, so they gently recommended she sit those out. No problem. Ability to "dive with your camera" policy was great news for me. A crew of 19 Indonesians, a new Indonesian divemaster, Seno, and Linda and Karl, a divemaster couple on the boat 14 months each, (previous location was feeding sharks at a Bahamian resort) was the dive crew. The crew, though most did not speak much English, were affable and very helpful. The captain would come down and help me on with my suit. They loved helping and after a few days, when I would remove my glasses just before donning my mask, one of the crew would be holding my dry box open for my glasses! They would sleep, catch as catch can, and you would find a few curled up together in various locations, sleeping (the bridge was a popular spot). Reminded us of kittens. Rooms were straightened and cleaned right on schedule every day. The food was plentiful and varied. 4 meals per day: light early breakfast before the 1st dive at 7:30, then ordered hot breakfast. Late morning dive, after a short break, lunch was served, always fresh greens, sometimes leftovers from

last night's dinner, and other choices. Little siesta time and afternoon dive around 2:30 — 3:00. Snack time, then either a dusk or night dive followed by dinner. These would have a theme from various countries. We had 2 BBQ dinners, Italian, Greek, Mexican, Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, etc. The boat itself is very comfortable and relatively spacious. My wife and I were in one of the upgrade rooms one level above the main deck. Lots of room and windows with a large double bed. Heads in every room. The rooms below decks were as large or larger than any other live-aboard I have been on. The divemasters know the reefs quite well and Seno, despite being new with this crew, was a great spotter of many of the wonderful creatures encountered. Karl and Linda were a good team. Karl caught something nasty brought on board by one of the guests and spent a day and a half in his room. Linda did double duty and it worked out well. Karl was particularly helpful to me. In order to get many of the tiny, elusive creatures to pose for my camera, he would spend many precious moments gently coaxing these critters for me. Elegant squat lobsters, pink squat lobsters, cling fish, crinoid shrimp, etc. On a dive on Sangiang Island, Linda found 3 new creatures, not previously seen on their dives and Karl was quick to get in the water and see them. Elegant cuttlefish, striated frogfish and boxer crab. Along with these, all in this same area, were: juvenile clown frogfish, sea-horse, anemone crab, inimicus (3!), other small cuttlefish and on and on. Overall, the diving was excellent by Pacific standards. We had a manta day

that included a few sharks and the diving to and from Komodo Nat'l Park was spectacular. The fish life was very diverse, corals both hard and soft were lush and the small critters were so plentiful. The nudibranchs were particularly varied. Once we hit the park and Horseshoe Bay on south Rinca Island, I was blown away. It truly is the center of diversity. The weather was great, mostly sunny and quite warm each day. The waters were never bad but we did get a little "lumpy" at times but usually it was quite smooth. The "cold" water on the south portion of Komodo Nat'l Park was in the upper 70's so we lucked out there as well. Usually it can be colder. Otherwise, the water temp was in the low 80's.

Sea Safari III, Kararu, October 2003, Sam Pearlstein, DPM (sbpdpm@hotmail.com) Manlius, NY. Dives logged: 450. Vis: 20-70 ft. Water: 76-82 F. Our group of nine from all over the U.S booked through Jenny Collister of Reef'n Rainforest. We all gathered at the Ramada Bintany on Bali. Great place for food, accommodations and atmosphere. Taken to *Sea Safari III*, a wooden Indonesian boat. Had two masts. They only put the sails out one day for us to see. Otherwise it motors at a comfortable 8-9 knots. Crew of 19 Indonesians who worked well together and were pleasant. The crew, including the captain, Pak Yan, spoke just enough English and tried hard to make everyone happy. Our food services in the salon, Adong and Made, were more well versed in English. On arrival, in my cabin (which had my name on the outside of

the door which was a classy touch), I found a t-shirt, woven sandals, post cards, information on our boat and trip and information about the area. I had a cabin to myself. The bed was the most comfortable of the 6 I have been on. The A/C worked well in the cabin. As recommended by the divemasters Karl (USA) and Linda (UK), I kept the A/C barely cooling the cabin at night time so my sinuses would stay clear. It worked! The food was varied and very good and the chef, Didi, also massaged many of the passengers for an hour for \$10. . Thai, Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, barbecue, Mexican, Italian. Fruit, juice, coffee, croissants and chocolate croissants all before the first dive. Also had a couple of night dives besides the twilight dives. The crew handled your gear and cameras with care. Charging stations were in the salon and camera work stations were on the port side of the boat. The dive deck with your own locker was forward of the salon. The area was covered from the sun. Dived using nitrox the whole trip. Several laundry lines were strung to let wetsuits dry. Two swift tender boats dropped us and picked up the divers with easy to use ladders. our cameras were covered by towels when on the tender boats, a nice touch. The divemasters, Karl, Linda and Seno (first time for Seno) were the best. Karl and Linda could point out the greatest underwater creatures, practically frame them for us, and carefully return them to their home. It's ok to dive by yourself! I did 36 dives! Dozens of different and colorful nudibranchs, all of the angel fish I hoped to see, red and white leaf scorpion fish,

fire fish (lion fish), titan triggers, clown anemones, clown triggerfish, ghost pipefish, piercing mantis shrimp, octopus, eels including blue ribbon eels, hawksbill turtles, elegant squat lobsters, sea apples, fire urchins, mantas, white tip reef sharks, nurse sharks, torpedo ray, decorator crabs, porcelain crabs, skeleton crabs, moray eels, flathead (crocodile fish), inimicus (devil scorpion fish), Plateo pinnatus batfish, pygmy seahorses(!), flamboyant cuttlefish, striated (hairy) frogfish, school of barracuda, juvenile clown frog fish. It was mostly a macro heaven. We also stopped in Komodo to shoot pictures of the dragons and purchase inexpensive pearls. There were only a couple of dives where the current was a factor. Easily my best dive trip ever. When our group disembarked we went inland on Bali and stayed at the most placid, utopian, relaxing inn I have ever enjoyed called the Alam Indah. Jenny Collister of Reef'n Rainforest did a great job for us!

Sea Safari III, July 2004, Bob Ewald (rewald@bellsouth.net), Louisville, KY. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 79 Fahrenheit, calm. Very spacious boat. Relatively large cabins with queen size beds or twins, ensuite toilets and showers. Cabins had individual AC controls that actually worked. Large indoor and outdoor lounge areas. Crew of 19 worked very hard, including washing all dive gear after the last dive. Land trip to Komodo Island was enjoyable. Nitrox available. I've been on more than 20 live-boards and found the food well

above average. Most diving was in and around the Komodo National Park. Diving is done entirely from 2 small dinghies which would be crowded with a full complement of 18 divers. Likewise, the dive deck would be a bit crowded with 18 divers. Most itineraries arrive and depart from Bali and the crossing to Komodo is 18 hours, so a ten day trip does not mean 10 days of diving. Very good, very comfortable live aboard. The operator was responsive to pre-trip inquiries and helpful with arrangements. UW Photography: Plenty of room on camera tables and good storage area for accessories. Two large dip tanks. E-6 procession available.

Sea Safari III, July 2004, Brian & Karen Woods (woodybk@earthlink.net) Bothell, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. We did the 7 night Bima to Bali trip. By flying to Bima, we saved a full day of steaming before beginning to dive. Soon after boarding, lunch was served and we met three other guests who were beginning their second week aboard the *Sea Safari*. Diving started with an afternoon and night dive off Sumbawa. The next day we moved into the northern area of the Komodo National Park. Most days, either 4 or 5 dives were available including a night dive; twilight dive was offered to see mandarin fish. While diving off of Padar Island at a site called W Reef, one of the two skiffs capsized while traveling out to the dive site. Nobody was hurt but a Nikonos V with a 15mm set up was

lost. Before the next dive, the crew had purged the engines of the saltwater and had the skiff back in the water. The guest who had lost the camera was loaned an Olympus camera in a Tetra housing to use. The next morning we were moored off of Komodo Island and we went to see the dragons, which can be easily seen with 3 mile walk from the dock. Each day we continued south into the park and the diving got better until we got to Rinca. Everyone had expected the water temperature to fall from 82-83 F and for the visibility to decrease. This never happened although the prior week water temps were down into the low 70's. At Rinca, every square inch of the reefs were covered with life; ornate ghost pipefish, pigmy seahorses, orangutan crabs, flying gurnards, manta rays, sharks, zebra crabs, Coleman shrimp, squat lobsters, emperor shrimp, mantis shrimp, cuttlefish and more. The boat itself is a 136' Pinisi style wooden schooner. Although equipped with sails, all travel is done under power. Since it is a wood boat, it creaks as it moves through the water. There are 6 cabins located on the lower deck, 4 with twin beds and 2 with king size beds. The cabins with twins have a lot of room but the rooms with the kings size beds are cramped. Too much floor space is taken up but the oversize bed. The middle deck has the dining area, a lounge area with a TV, stereo, DVD along with a large selection of movies and reference books, a small gift shop, the kitchen and the crew quarters. On the upper deck are two more cabins which are larger than all of the other

cabins. Comfortable lounge area with couches and chairs. On the top deck, multiple deck chairs for those who want to catch rays. The dive deck is on the middle deck, forward of the dining area. Each diver has an area under his or her seat to store equipment. Tanks are filled in place with either air or 32% Nitrox. After a dive briefing, cameras and fins are moved to the skiffs. The boat is equipped with a set of stairs on the starboard side so access in and out of the skiffs is excellent. Entry into the water is via back roll. After completing your dive, one of the two skiffs was always there to pick you up. After handing up cameras, you could either remove your weights, BCD, fins and climb up the ladder or you could choose to climb up with your tank and BCD. Divers were allowed to dive any profile and solo diving was allowed but all divers were warned that it was a long way to the closest chamber so be careful. The crew was always there to help. For 16 passengers there were 22 crew. Next time, we'll take the eleven-night trip. Good set up for photographers, separate rinse tanks for cameras along with a large camera table and multiple charging stations although the location of the camera table could be better. It is located outside and runs along the port side of the boat, which is also the main traffic pattern into the boat. E-6 processing is available along with a PC to download digital files and a CD burner. Crew careful with equipment and after a dive, they would transfer cameras from the skiffs on to the camera table after a stop in the rinse tank.

Raja Ampat

Adventure Komodo, February 2004, Tari Suprpto (tarisuprpto@hotmail.com) New York, NY.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Ft. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm, currents, no currents. The boat is a 75 foot catamaran. It is sleek, clean, and outfitted very well for its passengers. We took great advantage of the six bean bags for naps and hanging out on the front deck. There was a CD player for ambient music. There was also a DVD player and we had a few movie nights, but the DVDs rarely played smoothly and would have been happier bringing our own selection. Being a catamaran, it does rock when the water is less than flat. The captain was an Indonesian named Capt. Wesley, who was enthusiastic about finding great dive sites, helpful. The head chef was Elizabeth, a lovely Australian woman who was trained at the Cordon Bleu in London, who helped me stay on the South Beach Diet, and kept our bellies full with great Asian and Western food. There was also an Indonesian chef named Bobby who was full of smiles and made really spicy things, and Made was our steward who kept our rooms clean and served wine at dinner (beer and wine from the Eaglevale vineyard in Margaret River, Australia are complimentary). Buyung & Sofyan who helped us with our equipment and made sure we safely got to our dive sites and returned to the mother ship. The diving was fantastic. The cruise director and dive leader was the great Larry Smith, a Texan who is essentially Indonesian after spending so many

years in Indonesia. We also had another divemaster, Paulus, who took care of the novice divers in the group. Larry carefully choose dive sites according to our tastes. In fact, you can design your itinerary with the help of his handy electronic chart! We did do a bunch of exploration dives — some which were good, and some which were kind of boring but exploration means no guarantees. We started out in Kofi' Au and then headed to the Boo Islands for white sand and great coral reef systems. We then went to the Misool Islands which are limestone craggy islands and started seeing schools of bumphead parrotfish, wahoos, mobula rays, and amazing walls. We also visited a WWII airplane wreck and discovered a manta ray cleaning station resulting in a wonderful close encounter with the mantas. We ended the trip in glorious style at Sardine Reef which was teeming with fish and fun currents to ride. Had a designated camera table on the dive deck — good for two photographers and a videographer but if any more, would have gotten really cramped. There was a laptop provided on board to review digital photos, but our photographers brought their own Vaionotebooks so it was not needed. Didn't see any evidence of facilities to process print film. (www.adventureh2o.com)

MV Putri Papua, Grand Komodo Tours, January 2004, Peggy & Jose Miguel Duran, M.D., Corpus Christi, TX. We spent 12 glorious days diving the Raja Ampat archipelago (Papua Barat, formerly Irian Jaya) aboard the *MV Putri Papua* (Papuan Princess) the newest boat operated by Grand

Komodo Tours of Bali. We started diving Indonesia's eastern Irian Jaya — Cendrawasih Bay — 1991 through 1993 aboard the *Tropical Princess*. In January, 2001 we spent two weeks at Camp Kri, Raja Ampat, with Irian Divers and we were delighted to find that the diving on the western side was even better. The schools of fusiliers, unicorns, trevallies, barracudas, sweetlips, batfishes, bumphead parrots, in places like Sardine Reef were incredible, a density of marine life not seen anywhere else. However, the limited range of their dive boat meant that we had to repeat quite a few dive sites around Kri Island. Also, after suffering three attacks of malaria (by both *P.falciparum* and *P. vivax*) over the following ten months — even with Lariam prophylaxis and extensive use of 100% DEET—we decided that the best way to dive Raja Ampat would be by live-aboard. Boat owner Nyoman Kirtia designed it with the experience of many years building and operating dive boats. It is about 100 feet long, wide beamed and remarkably stable. The dining/lounge area is comfortable and spacious. The staging area is large, well designed, includes a head and a large photography table and rinse tanks, and opens to a water level diving/boarding platform at the stern. Almost all the diving was from a large fiberglass dinghy. Downstairs are 4 four double and one triple cabins, all with portholes, heads, storage space and individually controlled AC as well as reading lights. Beautiful woodwork throughout, and nice decoration touches. There is double cabin with large windows on the second deck next to a

large covered open-air lounge with TV, DVD and charging station.: Divemaster Weka, Captain Rahmat and cook Nico, Peter, Arcil and Jerry were all professional, accommodating and determined to make our vacation great. The food was a good combination of western and Asian fare, tasty and plentiful. Between dives snacks ranged from delicious fruit smoothies to fantastic sashimi. The boat would have been comfortable with a full booking. Since the only other passengers were my wife and daughter and a British diver, it was luxurious. GKT never cancels their departures due to low bookings. We did great sites in Kri like Melissa's Garden, Sardine & Chicken Reefs, Mike's Point and Cape Kri all awesome. Fam and Misol Islands provided quite a few great new sites. At Manta Point we had one of the most unforgettable of our more than 1700 dives. At fifty feet over a white sand channel with 2 large coral heads, used as cleaning stations by mantas, we spent over 45 minutes with as many as seven large manta rays performing an elegant ballet and hovering just over our heads. Landscapes are spectacular with lush rain forest covering mountainous islands. Some images like a magical sunset with clouds of flying foxes taking off a small island towards a horizon dotted with lights from the squid fishing boats, stay with you forever. Getting there involves traveling to Sorong, Papua Barat, either thru Bali and then flying to Makassar and Sorong or from Singapore and Manado. GKT were helpful arranging hotels and domestic flights. Makassar is worthwhile visiting and their seafood

is renowned through Indonesia. Raja Ampat and Komodo are arguably the two best dive areas in the Indo Pacific after the devastation of the 1998 El Nino. They are still sparsely visited although knowledgeable divers keep going back again and again. (www.komodoalordive.com)

Sulawesi & Wakatobi

Mona Lisa, French Nat'l Etienne, April 2004, Wuni and George Ryschkewitsch, Gainesville, FL. Vis: 40-100 feet. Water: 82-86 F. Dives logged: 3,570. Good, sturdy sailboat. Each diver had one tank, air only. Great diving where the reef was not dynamited. Lorenz from Wakatobi Resort would not let us dive anywhere near his island — he allegedly bribed the police to chase the *Mona Lisa* away. The *Mona Lisa* crew was great — good sailors. Divemaster was Belgian — a good man. Currents often were extremely strong, typical Indonesia. Hard to get to Kandari — flights unpredictable. No en-suite accommodations, but 2 heads and 3 showers. Group of 10 — boat could hold 14. Crew of 11 very helpful.

MALDIVES

These 7000 low-lying coral islands in a 1200-mile chain southeast of India will be among the first to disappear if global warming raises sea levels significantly. The reefs have already suffered significant coral bleaching. About 200 islands are inhabited (though visitors have very little interaction with

the predominantly Muslim residents), and several are devoted entirely to small resorts, some of which offer average to excellent reef diving and big fish action — if the resort has a knowledgeable dive staff. The Maldives are best dived from live-aboards, and it's a favorite destination of European divers. ... Expect year-round daily temperatures of roughly 85 degrees and abundant rainfall from May through December.

Manthiri, September 2003, Peter Belden, San Francisco, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. This was our best trip of 10 dive trips. 2 whale sharks! The crew actually spotted 8 different whale sharks from the boat but we only saw two while in the water. We were approached by both on our safety stop and all the whale sharks were spotted on one of the 8 days. There is one spot where they consistently hang out. Mantas were only an occasional fly by. We didn't see any manta cleaning stations from the boat. However we did dive for one day from the Four Seasons on another part of the trip and there we spent 30 minutes with 5 mantas. Though still some coral damage from El Nino, the fish were very abundant. Giant schools swarming around you and occasional dog toothed tuna strafing by to hunt them. There were also plenty of places with beautiful coral. White tip reef sharks were common and one day we also saw a large gray shark. Many turtles. Dives had a great diversity of topography and we also did some great night dives.

There were some strong currents and one dive we did aborted early due to extreme current. The food was extraordinary. Home cooked meals the whole time and plenty of it. The boat is made for 12 divers and 12 crew but on our trip there were only 4 divers! Visit the *Manthiri* website for photos of the boat. The crew was very friendly and even helped us with some minor gear repairs. Nancy the travel agent at Livewell Ventures who books the *Manthiri* gave us a great Sri Lanka itinerary for 4 days before the diving. For the flight from Sri Lanka to the Maldives fly first class. It's only about \$20 more but they give you much better food, seats, etc., and you get to spend your layover in the much nicer first class lounge which also has free food and free Internet access! The Maldives is a world-class destination and the *Manthiri* is an excellent boat. You'll see more fish than you ever thought possible. Boat has a camera table and rinse tank. (www.manthiri.com)

RED SEA

Excel, March 2004, Paul Mampilly Brooklyn, NY. 200+ dives. Rain and Reef Forest's Dominick McCann was diligent and provided courteous service. In Cairo I was greeted by a rep from Eastmar Travel, the agent that RRFT uses. He tried to pump me for \$20 claiming that because I had an Indian passport, there would be extra processing time and the \$20 would expedite matters. I was willing to wait and it was a ruse; my passport was processed in a couple of minutes. Next he asked if I would accompany him to