

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

the duty free shop so and purchased a number of things while keeping me waiting. I told him I wanted to leave and the value of the products were stamped in my passport. Flamenco Hotel is a tourist class hotel in Zamaalek (a well placed locale). Reasonably clean, though the furniture and curtains and TV could use replacement. It is next to an Internet café and the Metro Supermarket which has terrific prepared food for take out. Flights to Hurghada leave early in the morning, so I had decided to take a bus from Cairo to Hurghada. A major mistake. To get to my bus, I had to trek through a wet and muddy area. There, I was told by the rep from Eastmar that I must tip the driver. Not that I mind tipping the driver but I did not appreciate the threat like attitude. The rep told me the trip would take seven hours. Dom had told me five hours and it was to be a luxury/express bus. It stopped at least five times. The driver blasted Friday prayers and various Arabic programming. He stopped repeatedly for cigarette breaks. The bus stank of urine and passengers repeatedly lit up despite it being a 'non-smoking' bus. I was disgusted by the time I reached Hurghada. The live aboard operator – Tony Blackwell Scuba UK — had been told that I would arrive at 5.30 pm, but I did not get there until 7.30 pm. Their representative was on their final search when they found me. The live aboard boat was at Marsa Alam, a three hour ride. I finally arrived and was assigned a cabin below deck. From the porthole hung a black plastic bag and along the wall were signs that there had been heavy leaking from both portholes. I

did not ask for a change in cabin until mid-week when the porthole with the plastic bag began to leak regularly. My mattress was soaked and I had to pull all my things away. The *Excel* is well worn. The cabins are all small with a two door closet (one door was broken in the second cabin I was in) and a small bedside table which also had a shelf. There is a reading light for each bed and a main light which is quite bright. The cabins below deck are dingy, dark and feel claustrophobic. The trip was a complete disappointment. On a couple of dives we saw a few turtles. Once I saw a shark. No hammerheads. No tuna. The promised profusion of fish life in the Red Sea seemed to have gone on vacation. There were several dives which were worse than Caribbean dives in so-so diving destinations like St. Martin. I was so disheartened by the boat and the diving that I stopped recording the dive sites and by the 5th day, used a mild cold as an excuse stopped diving altogether. The diving instructors were new (3 - 4 weeks) and were in a sour mood as the group before had been similarly disappointed. A group of divers ended up getting surfed over the reef. They were lucky not to have been badly hurt. The dive staff claimed to be on the lookout for SMBs – floats that are released from underwater – but , nobody was actually looking for them or for divers. I saw an SMB come up and the divers come up and alerted the crew that something was amiss. One dive instructor had already come up and was in the shower when the whole thing occurred. The Red Sea is either in decline or else is a seasonal dive

spot. I had booked the rest of my trip with RRF with mixed results. I took a cruise down the Nile to Aswan. This is enjoyable but the Nile is so congested with cruise boats that most of the moving is done by bus that leave in the morning to various sites and bring you to the boats that have moved along with you. I was scheduled to fly from Aswan to Cairo on Egypt Air before going on to Dubai. A car had been arranged by Eastmar Travel. A beat up old taxi pulled up. It broke down three times in the desert heat. I contacted RRF once I got back and provided detailed complaints. Since, the trip was expensive, I asked them if they were willing to provide some recompense. Jenny Collister wrote me an e-mail to say she would look into the complaints but I've not heard from her since. I also wrote Tony Blackwell, but received no response. I'm an experienced traveler and a reasonably experienced diver. (www.scubaredsea.com)

THAILAND

Anggun, February 2004, Bob & Doris Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net)

Fallbrook, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 25 to 80 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm, currents. The dive sites in Thai waters were usually crowded with other live-aboards and day boats. By the time we got into the waters of Myanmar, we had the ocean to ourselves. Visibility wasn't as good as we had hoped and there were lots of cold thermoclines. Could dive 4 tanks a day (including the night dive). Cabins are well-maintained and comfortable (but short on towels, although we

understand they have plans to add more). Food is outstanding — mostly Thai — and plentiful. Both Western and Asian breakfasts each morning. The crew is very attentive, caring and friendly and went beyond the call of duty in catering to the divers. Tips for crew were handled in the best possible way when the owner called all the crew together to say good-bye on our last morning and handed the cup with crew tips directly to them. A few negatives: *Anggun* carries 14 divers (just 11 on our trip) but only one skiff; dive deck is small and rule that group 2 doesn't suit up until group 1 is in the water needs to be followed; no deck towels which is an inconvenience; divers are divided into groups that dive with same divemaster for every dive — it would be nice to alternate divemasters. All in all, it was a good trip and the positives far outweighed the negatives. The dive deck and camera tables are small and crowded. Some divers were permitted to spread miscellaneous gear on the camera tables but cramped quarters on dive deck encouraged this. (www.genesis1phuket.com)

Anggun Genesis, March 2004, Cliff Schaffer (clif@slmclaw.com), Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 50-75 feet. Water: 82-84 F. Dives logged: 1,000+. Thailand gets too busy with lots of boats and divers at the same spot. Burma Banks was more isolated and better diving. Death of diver on rebreather put pale on trip, but boat and crew response and attempt to save diver was excellent. Comfortable boat and crew was great. They even help take fins, boots, and wetsuit off before