

and dove a different site than the rest of my group, my gear was there, on the boat waiting for me. After the dives, we were transported back to our hotels. The sites were wonderful. I had read that they weren't as good as they were when the area was under Israeli control, but I found the coral to be plentiful, beautiful, and the fish everywhere. Lunch was included each day for a small additional fee. Pasta was a main selection, but other food was always included. Most dives were drift dives which allowed us to complete the dives and relax on the surface as the boat returned to pick us up. The dive I made on the day I dove without my group was to the "Thistlegorm." It is a WWII British supply ship that was sunk early in WWII. It was 100 feet to the bottom and about 80 feet to the deck. The holds were open and contained jeeps, motorcycles, trucks and other war supplies. The fish life around the wreck was abundant. The divemasters (ours was Hooch) were very knowledgeable and allowed us to enjoy the dives at our own pace. They were there to lead the dive, but not there to restrict safe exploration. The group I dove with were all experienced and Hooch allowed us to enjoy the dives. My last day of diving was with the other people that accompanied me. They arrived a couple of days after me and were placed on another boat. They had told their divemaster that they didn't want to go deep and their divemaster accompanied them at shallower depths. Other members on their boat were allowed to dive deeper. The divemaster could watch both groups because the visibility was excellent.

She was perfectly suited to divers of that level of training and experience. The dive facility was outstanding. On the second day, our van that was taking us to the harbor, broke down, but we were stranded for only about five minutes before another van picked us up. One area for improvement would be to increase the number of vans available to transport divers to/from the shop. Often, the wait at the end of day would be several hours after arrival at the shop before a van would be available to return us to our hotel. Radisson SAS Resort is a new resort five miles from the airport in the direction opposite the town. They offered a full BandB service or full Board. The meals were well prepared and served buffet style. They had special theme meals several nights. (We were there for six nights.) Being so far out of town, we were dependent on their shuttle service. When you took the shuttle from the hotel to town at 7:00 PM you couldn't get back to the hotel until 11:00. Taxis were available and reasonable, but we could have walked to most resorts because they were much closer to town. (www.redseacollege.com)

Red Sea Dive College, March 2004, Barbara Anderson (shrinski@aol.com), Winter Park, FL. Vis: 60-80 feet. Water: 70-75 F. Unique and wonderful diving. The Red Sea Dive College is professional and well organized. The boat was comfortable, had indoor space to hide from the sun, as well as great sunning locations. We asked for a trip to dive the Blue Hole and the canyon and it was honored, as

well as a night dive. I was surprised how friendly everyone was toward Americans (dive staff, shop keepers, hotel staff).

SEYCHELLES

Billed as 3000 miles from anywhere, this group of islands has decent reef diving. From time to time live-aboards run to the out-island of Aldabra, which is reported to have excellent diving. ... Island prices are high.

North Island Resort, November 2003, Erwin P. Staller, Huntington, NY. Dives logged: 250+. Vis: 20-30 ft. Dive restrictions enforced: depth and time. My wife and I ventured off to North Island in the Seychelles. After approximately 17 hours of flying via Paris to Mahi, and then by helicopter for 15 minutes to the North Island, we were amazed as to what we had booked. It was paradise. The accommodations, food and beach were just perfect. Regarding the diving, I had some awesome and spectacular dives with mostly tropical and small fish varieties. We did see several large turtles, lobsters and devil fish. The dive operation was very well run, very professional and they did everything possible to assist the diver in and out of the water. Happily, the coral, to a small degree, is reviving. I did see several patches of anemone with its clown fishes darting in and out, as well as new forms of hard coral. Unfortunately, there were no fans or sponges to speak of. I would suggest anyone who is interested in a fantastic

vacation, including diving, should pawn the family jewels and make this trip. (www.north-island.com)

THAILAND

Thailand is a bargain and scores of day boats and liveaboard make trips into the Andaman Sea to Richelieu Rock where fish life can be exciting. ... Many liveaboards extend their trips to the Burma Banks in Myanmar, where most divers — not all — find superior diving. ... Thailand has unending opportunities for broader travel experiences and any dive trip out to have a few extra days to appreciate the culture.

Big Blue Dive Resort, July 2004, John Crossley (jcrossle@csufresno.edu), Fresno, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Although the seas were flat, and the water was a toasty 84 to 86 degrees, visibility was 40 to 50 feet, and sometimes less. A few dive sites had hundreds of anemones, and White Rock had a super friendly red wrasse named Lucy that would swim right into your hands to be stroked. Other sites typically had some nice reef fish and nudibranchs, but not much in the way of big fish or any special critters. Big Blue Dive Resort was the most disorganized and poorly managed dive resort I have ever visited. Problems included botched transfers, loss of my reservation (although I had several email confirmations), mediocre food at best, poor lighting in the rooms, weak air conditioning, huge cracks in door and window frames that let mosquito's in, no

hot water, a toilet that could barely flush, a disorganized dive shop for gear storage, a shower drain that had a strong sewer smell, and not a single hook, towel rack, or shower curtain rod in my room to hang anything on. The divemasters were pretty good, and they give good instruction. The main market seems to be: 20-something Europeans who want to learn diving on the cheap while they smoke and drink a lot after diving. This island is getting pretty junked up with bad roads and dilapidated buildings. It does have a couple nice resorts. (www.bigbluediving.com)

Sea Bees, Palm Garden Resort, May 2004, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. on Phuket Island. Thailand part of the trip was set up by www.worldofdiving.com. which included 6 nights at Palm Garden Resort, 3 days of 2 tank boat dives and 6 nights on the live-aboard Marco Polo. All for only \$1554, plus airfare. Palm Garden Resort on Phuket Island is a small resort in the jungle about 300 yards outside Chalong. It has 12 bungalows with 24 rooms wrapped around a swimming pool. The rooms are quite nice and have a separate drying room for your dive gear. The small Thai staff is very friendly and keep's the place in great shape. The resort mainly caters to Europeans; being the only American there I did not feel out of place. The cook would make custom meals for you, if you did not see anything on the menu you liked. You could get Thai food as mild or as hot as you wanted. Great little resort. If you want a beach this is not the place to be. Also Palm Garden is within walking distance of

several dive shops and places to eat. no nightlife in Chalong and very little shopping. Sea Bees dive shop is affiliated with Palm Garden. Palm Garden is very hard to find, email them and have them pick you up. www.palm-garden-resort.com www.info@palm-garden-resort.com contact (Hilla). Sea Bees is 300 yards from Palm Garden Resort. I was set up to do 3 days of diving before going on a live-aboard. (by www.worldofdiving.com) Sea Bees picks up divers from as far away as Patong (about 25 min. drive) at no charge. So you can stay on the other side of the island with the beaches. We met at the dive shop at 9 am and are bused to the pier and on to the boat. Sea Bees Dive boat is 72 ft long and 15 ft wide. The Excalibur II takes as many as 30 divers. One divemaster for every 4 divers, after being in the Caribbean it was like having a personal guide. All dive sites are at least 1 hour out to sea. So breakfast is served, your divemaster will find you and go over the dive info and times and safety stop is a must. All dives are 50 minutes or 750psi — with a 3-minute safety stop at 18 feet. You could go off on your own if you had a computer, safety sausage and watched your time. After the first dive lunch is served and you get an 1-hour surface interval. Dive briefing and next 50 minute dive. Fruit trays are served for the ride back to the dock; this is an all day trip 9am - 5pm. The shop, the divemasters, the Thai crew, and the boat were all excellent. All Europeans, so as the only American diver I did not feel out of place. The corals both hard and soft were in great shape. Tons of tropical

fish and small critters, a few large fish. Some current, most surge was above 25 feet. The Monsoon rains had not yet started. (www.sea-bees.com)

VIETNAM

Rainbow Divers, Phu Quoc Island, January 2004, Jan R. Shaw, Seattle, WA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 15 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, choppy. Rainbow Divers has been active in Vietnam in the Nha Trang area (a marine reserve on the East Coast of Vietnam) for over 10 years. Phu Quoc is an island off Vietnam's Southwestern Coast located in the Gulf of Thailand. This branch of the operation has been present for just over a year and runs out of the Phu Quoc Saigon resort. The multilingual staff onboard the boat was friendly, knowledgeable, and very competent. Although the website www.divevietnam.com states that January is the poor season for Na Trang (it's often rainy) and the good season for Phu Quoc (it was hot and sunny), both the limited visibility (15-30 feet max) and lack of marine life (most fish were about 2 inches long other than a lone angel fish seen once a day) were a bit of a surprise. The reason became apparent after we anchored in an area in between two fishing boats. I dove for two days in the North of the island for two dives a day. Saw more fish in fish trap that we opened underwater than anywhere else. The soft corals were magnificent and there were occasional nudibranchs. The weather got better and we were able to go the South part of the island the third day for two more dives. South has

much better visibility (up to 25-30 feet) and greater variety of fish. Also a nice 45 minute bus trip to that dock. The above water climate was great for January, warm (over 85 F) bright sun, palm trees, sandy beaches. I stayed at the Tropicana Resort. You have to leave your passport with the on shore people to dive. Rainbow Divers accepts VISA (with a 3% fee) and give a 10% discount if you dive with them for three days. I rented everything including the 3mm suit except my mask. It was all new and well maintained gear. If you're in Vietnam and want to get wet by all means go dive. It's just not like diving in Thailand. But then how many people can say that they've dove in Vietnam? (www.divevietnam.com)

Rainbow Divers, Nha Trang Lodge Hotel, May 2004, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. I set up with Rainbow Divers out of Nha Trang www.divevietnam.com. For 6 nights and 5 days of 2-tank speed boat diving came to \$554, staying at at one of the more expensive hotels. The airfare was set up by Number One Travel www.onetravelworld.com which had no problems finding flights to or from Vietnam. So from Washington DC to Phucket to Nha Thang Vietnam and back including Vietnam Visa fee, was \$15350. Get your Visa first before you go. The Nha Trang Lodge Hotel is a 4 star hotel. With a dive package from Rainbow Divers you can get a room for \$40US a night that includes breakfast. The hotel is just across the street from the beach and a block from the main square. The staff is very friendly and speaks English. very nice place to

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