

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

you sit down. Good variety of food served buffet style — great Thai dishes and cooking lesson at end of trip. Camera space was tight. Most diving from panga. Break divers into 3 groups and stagger entry. Dive guide with each group were knowledgeable, but they should rotate groups. Good shark dive with large Nurse Sharks. Good photo/video of sharks. Impresses non-divers. Staterooms comfortable. No hot towels on deck. Expected to use bath towel all day and get new one at 6 p.m. Not great, especially for night dives. Pascal and Liana run a good and friendly operation that needs a few tweaks to make better, all of which are easily doable.

Aqua One, February 2004, Nick Ferris, Arvada, CO. A twin screw steel monohull 115 feet in length and a beam of 21 ? feet. There are 8 state rooms for a maximum of 16 divers. Some rooms are on the main deck, some a deck down. The rooms are large, with a queen bed or two singles, a large window, drawers and cabinets, and space under the bunks, a bathroom, shower, toilet that works, and a sink. Lounge/dining room is on the main deck and aft of that is the dive deck. camera tables and charging facilities (110 and 240 v) are on the upper deck. After gearing up, the diver goes down a few steps to the dive platform at the stern and either strides into the water or gets into one of two Zodiacs. A head is located on the dive deck. Crew was polite and embarrassingly helpful. It was hard to shoo away an attendant determined to put my fins on my feet. Several Thai ladies pre-

pared and served meals. None understood much English. Breakfast consisted of pancakes/French toast, eggs, and bacon, and fruit. The coffee machine ground the beans and brewed the coffee. Lunch and dinner were part American dishes and part Thai, with a vegetarian choice as well. Johnnie Gallick is the manager, and Nuswanto (“Nus”) and Ali are Indonesian dive guides with experience in the Lembah Strait region. Their ability to see the invisible produced many victories for the photographers. Johnnie made the dive orientations hilarious with exaggerated theatrics. Most evenings there was night diving, much of it tended by zodiacs. Our 9 days of Andaman Sea diving took us first to the Similan Islands, then northwest to Koh Bon and Koh Tachai, and north to Richelieu Rock, the crown jewel of Andaman diving. After 6 dives there we motored southeastward to the “Five Islands” area and Koh Bini Nok, Koh Haa, and Hin Muang/ Hin Daeng which are directly south of Phuket. We did not go to the Surin Islands or the Burma Banks. The Similan Islands are domed, rounded granitic islands with huge rounded boulders at their bases and their dive sites. Koh Bon is comprised of faulted, dipping sea floor sedimentary strata. Richelieu Rock barely rises above the surface; the southern islands are composed of vertically jointed limestone, producing sheer cliffs which plunge as much as 150 feet into the ocean where they become spectacular wall dive sites. Underwater, the limestone islands offer caves and swim throughs. Visibility was usually 60 feet. Visibility suddenly changed on one of

the Richelieu Rock dives when the clam population proceeded to spawn. Thin streams of gametes plumed into clouds which coalesced into murky areas with visibility down to 5 feet. There were two dives with too much current to be enjoyable. There was surge to a variable extent, but in general the diving was good. Nearly anything of interest, from mantas to ghost pipefish, was between 20 and 90 feet in depth; and mostly above 65 feet. Water was a 83 degrees. We saw several mantas, but whale sharks are more legendary than real. Reef fish were abundant and ranged from butterflies and angels to schools of fusiliers, packs of trevallies, wandering open-mouthed groupers looking for a dental tech, to bunches of circling batfish and red saddleback anemonefish. Octopi were common and curious. Several hawksbill turtles approached closely. Nus and Ali produced harlequin shrimp, pipefish, squat lobsters. This frontier was well stocked with live-aboards and day boats from Phuket and along Patong beach, a 2 hour runs. Surfacing near the wrong boat or avoiding a new bunch of flailing tourists was not uncommon. Despite the heavy traffic, there was little coral damage and the wildlife was plentiful . . . At night rafts of lights are attached to a nearly infinite number of moored buoys, and the fishing boats themselves sport arrays of lights and it looks like a floating carnival. There was no provision for divers to log on or off the boat with each dive. One of our group failed to show up after the fourth, late afternoon, dive. Not long until sunset, it was evident that if he had drifted away

in the fairly strong current which had set up during the dive there was but a short time in which to find him. Both the chase boats were tied to the stern. The sun was nearly on the horizon. There appeared to be no established search procedure for missing divers. After some urging (from me) the boats got under way, one roughly down current, the other inexplicably 100 degrees away. No luck. But after the sun had set a light blinked irregularly several hundred yards down current, and a boat was directed to him. The lack of a check off board and search doctrine is a serious matter. Thailand, which has scenic national parks, elephant riding opportunities, colored gems, and gold Buddhas. Such tours as were taken by our group were well north of the Malay border region where warfare has been going on. The touristy seaport and airport area of Phuket is reached by a 1 ? hour Silk Airlines B 737 flight from Singapore. Singapore Airlines hybrid business/economy class Airbus 345 flight is designed to let people survive the 17 ? hour nonstop flight in reasonably good condition. The padded seats are wider, the leg room greater, there are both foot and leg rests, and dozens of movies on the video display that comes with each seat. Our extra cost was \$300. The configuration made a world of difference, especially to us inhabitants of geezerhood.
(www.dive-aquasports.com)

Marco Polo, May 2004, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. 65 ft long and 12ft wide, it holds 14 divers, 2-4 dive-masters, and a Thai crew. It has 2 toilets for everybody. 3 closed showers and 2

outside showers. Three of the seven cabins have A/C the other four only have a fan for each cabin. Each cabin has plenty of room, lots of storage under the bed. Each cabin has a 220v outlet; bring a converter. The Thai food was good and plenty of it. The diving we did was very good, we did 4 dives a day the weather and seas were great. The water was 82-85 degrees and the air was a hot 93 degrees. The diving was to the Similan Islands with a trip up to Richelieu Rock. The visibility was not that good; you could make out sharks at 50 ft but not clear enough to take pictures. Up close to the reef, 6 feet or less, visibility was great. All kinds of hard and soft corals and lots of small critters to take pictures of. Just a few of the fish we saw, Jenkins stingray, emperor angelfish, regal angelfish, Jan's pipefish, sea cobra, oriental sweetlips, triggerfish and so many more. Dive restrictions — 50-minute dive or 750 psi with a 3-minute safety stop at 6 meters or 18 feet. All divers are given a safety sausage so if you ran low on air the group stayed and you did your own safety stop. With only 5 divers on the boat I did not need a safety sausage. I had a divemaster as my personal guide. Overall the diving was very good, we did run into some current but not much. The dive crew was great, the Thai crew great. (www.liveboardphuket.net)

Mermaid I, January 2004, Mikki Betker and Mike Bush, Mableton, GA. My husband and I each have logged over 300 dives and this was our fifth live-aboard trip. The *Mermaid 1* and 2 are European-based and German — operated luxury boats. We chose the

newer *Mermaid 1* because it had private baths. (*Mermaid 2* is semi-private.) The service and facilities were outstanding and comparable or better to our recent *Fiji Aggressor* trip (which was also excellent). Our room in *Mermaid 1* was bigger, accommodating two double beds side-by-side and our own TV. The *Mermaid 1* boat is based in Phuket. Our trip included 26 out of 28 available dives, mostly in the renowned Similan Islands and world famous Richelieu Rock. In Phuket there is a comparable number of dive operators to Cozumel. Most dive sites were occupied by one or more other dive boats, although on only a couple occasions did we feel over-crowded. Fish life was awesome. Huge schools of juveniles appearing as 'back-scatter' in many of my pictures. We routinely saw anemone fish, lionfish, scorpionfish, eel, crab, lobster, Moorish idols, sweetlips, barracuda, triggerfish, parrotfish, batfish etc. etc. We saw a couple sea horses, blue spotted sting rays, a ghost pipefish, and several octopi. We saw the 'big guys' on at least every third dive: leopard sharks (within inches!), reef sharks, manta rays, and sea turtles. Dolphins chased the boat on one occasion. Ingo was our German-born divemaster and 'cruise leader,' very capable and experienced with the Thailand dive sites. He was flexible in trying to accommodate the entire group. Our trip was actually a series of two 4-1/2 day trips combined. On the second trip we had one inexperienced diver, and Ingo subtly paired him up with a second divemaster. On the first trip we were all experienced and Ingo allowed members of the group to go

off and do their own thing after observing us the first day. There was a little more current in the Andaman Sea than I expected, yet I found it manageable. All days started with a couple 80-100+ foot dives. Dive limits were set at 130 feet. Ingo did meet my request to do an 'easy' shallow dive one afternoon so that I could take 'took over a hundred shots with my digital camera at that fantastic site, called 'Snapper Alley,' and the others on the boat enjoyed the site so much that we stayed and did a night dive there again. Ingo even helped me when our travel reservations were slightly confused. We received a hotel room free-of-charge on the night between both trips. (Our luggage and gear conveniently remained on the boat.) Furthermore, he arranged to have the boat arrive home earlier than expected to accommodate our earlier flight. Ingo's Thailand-born wife proved to be an excellent cook and each meal consisted of at least 3-4 dishes, both Thai and western-influenced. Refreshingly absent were heavy desserts and cookies. If you need more than fresh and varied fruits, pack some candy bars! Meals and snacks were provided before and after every dive. Cereal, fruit, juices, bread, and peanut butter/jelly were available at all times. Alcoholic beverages could be purchased.' The other crew consisted of seven Thailand born young men who spoke no English yet were very professional and the most helpful. We could not even put on our own wet suits without their assistance. We never had to touch our equipment during the entire trip, either. Diving was as easy as it gets: just giant-stride off the back

of the boat or backwards-roll off the skiff. Navigation was nonessential — just pop up whenever you want and the boat or skiff would promptly pick you up. Safety sausages were recommended but were not usually necessary. On the first trip we had ten guests, and on the second we had nine. English was the primary language for all dive briefings even though we were the only Americans on the second trip. (www.amrnour.com)

MV Rhapsody, January 2004, John Crossley (jcrossle@csufresno.edu), Fresno, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to Fahrenheit, calm. A medium size wooden V hull live-aboard that does four and five day trips to the Similan Islands from Phuket. It's a pretty good ship but not nice like the better ships of the *Aggressor* fleet. There are only four air-conditioned ensuite cabins for eight divers, and there is pretty good space though not many shelves. It lacks a decent camera table so you do your camera work in the spacious salon. The dive deck is small, so we suited up four divers and a guide in each of two groups. The food, which is your choice on a huge menu, is excellent, with plenty of western and Thai choices. Overall the ship is clean but it does rock a bit in even normal seas. *Rhapsody's* dive operation is well organized and safety oriented. Its dive guides are decent but not great at finding critters. Dive sites were the popular locations, with nice corals, lots of colorful fish, some nice formations to swim though and interesting macro critters. We did not find the Harlequin Shrimps found on previous

trips. We had several close encounters with Leopard Sharks, and a dive at Koh Bon Ridge in beautiful water on a sunny day with three huge mantas that circled us for 30 minutes. Overall this ship is a good value because it's better than most, but not at the level and price of the top rated *Ocean Rover*. (www.amrnour.com)

Ocean Rover, November 2003, Brian Woods (woodybk@earthlink.net) Bothell, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. Our forth live-aboard trip and best by far. Boat very well laid out and in great condition. Best crew hands down, valet diving at its best. Crewmembers were always five steps ahead of you, especially Chai. They even put your fins on for you once you were in the dingy. All diving with the exception of one site was done from one of the two inflatables with entry via a back roll. Each dingy had a dive guide, Hans or Andy who were there to point out critters but they were not there to hold your hand and be your buddy. This topic was covered at the initial dive briefing. At the end of the dive, the dingy was there to pick you up wherever you surfaced which could be over a large area as most safety stops were done in blue water with strong currents. The drill at the end of the dive was to hand up weights, BCD and fins and enter via a ladder. All divers were issued 8' safety sausages, which were used on occasions by some divers. Once back on the *Ocean Rover*, the crew was there to rinse your camera and help you out of your gear that was then rinsed and hung up to dry. After a quick warm water

rinse on the dive deck, Pannee or Pantip the two hostesses, were there to hand you a warm towel to dry off. The time between dives was spent on the upper deck which hand both sun and shade. All meals were served in the lounge and were buffet style. The food was very good and there was always plenty to eat. Coolers were located in the lounge and upper sun deck and were stocked with pop, juices and beer. Beer and wine were available on an honor basis once you were done diving for the day. Also on the sun deck was an espresso machine which was a nice addition each morning while watching the sunrises. The diving was largely sea mounts in open oceans, which either broke the surface or came within a few meters of the surface. All sites had currents, which ranged from mild to hold on to your mask. own drafts were seen at some sites. Fish life ranged from schools that blocked out the sun (only on one dive where there was a significant upwelling of cooler water) to macro. Numerous mating cuttlefish each day and zebra sharks were the only sharks spotted. I'd rate this more of a macro spot than large animal spot, at least on this trip. Overall, would we go back — certainly to the *Ocean Rover* for the boat and the crew and the diving is good but there are better spots to go to first. Boat designed with UWP in mind, lots of room to work on camera's with multiply charging stations, 110 and 220v. E-6 processing available but not used on this trip. Computer available with P/S to download digital images. Crew very careful with camera gear, separate rinse tanks for cameras. (www.fantasea.net)

Ocean Rover, January 2004, Benjamin Glick (bglick@vgernet.net) Willamstown, MA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, currents. This trip was excellent overall. Saw lots of small critters including frogfish, ghost pipefish, harlequin shrimps, crabs eels and scorpionfish to numerous to count, schools of fish, cuttlefish, squid, octopi, large fish including one dive for an hour with two whale sharks, 4 leopard sharks on one dive and 5 mantas on one dive. The crew were the epitome of valet diving. They would even zip up my wet suit. The divemasters Hans and Andy worked hard every dive finding critters. The boat was in pristine condition and the cabins were comfortable with adjustable ac and hot water showers. Food was Western and Thailand all you could eat! They picked me up and delivered me back to the airport 45 min away. Try to visit Cambodia as Angkor Temples at Siem Reap are only a one hour flight from Bangkok. Try Royal Exclusive Travel in Bangkok on the www. They made all my travel res in SE Asia and were excellent. This boat was designed by a UWP.

Ocean Rover, January 2004, Linda Gettmann, Deer Harbor, WA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. This is the No. 1 live-aboard we've been on in over 16 years of diving the world. Fabulous service and wonderful diving on this two-year old, built for diving boat that sails out of Phuket. We dove several days in Thai waters 50-60 miles offshore in the Similans and Richeleau Rock, went up north into

Myanmar (Burma) waters and dove the Mergui Archipelago and Burma Banks. Viz wasn't so great lots of places, but the marine life made up for it — we were only able to shoot wide-angle two days of a ten day voyage. Excellent accommodations and food, the service is beyond belief, they help you on with your gear, even zip up your wetsuit, and at the end of the cruise, all gear is rinsed for you if you'd like. The dive guides pointed out tons of marine life, we saw several new critters we'd never seen before or photographed. Usually were moderate currents, a couple times they were very strong. This is not a place for beginners, most of the diving is done from the dinghy and most of the reefs start below 40 feet. Lots of safety stops were done hanging in blue water drifting with the current. Safety sausage is a must have, they furnish them on the boat. The Andaman Sea is pretty amazing. Mark Strickland is the photo pro on board, does an excellent job and will help you with any camera or equipment problem. E-6 processing and he did a great job there too, all 22 rolls of my Velvia film came out fabulous. Lots of camera tables and plugs for charging. Crew is very careful with camera gear, handing it in and out of dinghy's, and they rinse the cameras for you after the dive.

Ocean Rover, February 2004, Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 Fahrenheit, choppy, surge. Great live aboard, with incredible attention to detail and courteous staff. The boat is

very comfortable with many extras (the push button espresso maker was a real hit)! The diving was very interesting but some Thai sites very crowded; the Burma sites were also interesting but had much lower visibility (and no other boats). Some of the best dives occurred upon our return to Thailand (early morning before the other dive boats arrived). Overfishing has resulted in fewer large fish, but great macro shots were available! The divemasters went out of their way to show interesting features. Food was a little too oriented towards beef and pork and was too greasy for our tastes (no chicken as the avian flu removed all the chicken from the markets). Another highlight was the trip to Angkor Watt — a must see experience. UW Photography: Great set up for equipment: special cleaning tanks, storage and maintenance location (even a computer available for downloading digital shots).

Ocean Rover, March 2004, Ann Mcgrath (amcgrath@att.net) Alexandria, VA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm, currents. There is nothing bad about the *Ocean Rover*! She was built specifically for live-aboard diving, and is incredibly spacious for 16 divers. The crew is the most helpful of any crew we've ever seen (we took a vote). The diving in Thailand and Burmese waters usually involves current, so this is not beginner diving. There are two dinghies, so you never wait more than a few minutes to get picked up (unlike divers on other boats that we observed). The crew helps you get into your gear, gets your

fins and your camera equipment for you, and rinses it all off after a dive. The boat is incredibly organized — each diver has a numbered locker, as well as a towel and even designated water glasses! They have cold water coolers on the dive deck and upstairs on the sun deck. There were always great snacks upstairs, in addition to the fabulous meals and fresh made snacks they served us in the afternoons. The cabins are very large, with plenty of storage. The bathrooms are the nicest I've ever seen on a live-aboard, with tile floors and normal sized toilets. They make enough water that you don't have to worry about it, and each bathroom heats it's own water for your shower, so you never run out of hot water! The folks at Fantasea/Ocean Rover have received permission to dive in Burmese (Myanmar) waters, which is awesome. The diving in the Burma banks is clear and great — still plenty of current, but great stuff to see. We didn't encounter any whale sharks on this trip (but their numbers are dwindling), but we did see leopard sharks, manta rays and incredible sights like cuttlefish laying eggs (more than once), and lots of harlequin ghost pipefish, as well as their endemic saddleback anemone fish and the amazing mandarin shrimp! The charter just before ours included Ned deLoach and Paul Humann. The *Ocean Rover* has more room for photography equipment than any other live-aboard. They process E6 slide film as well. They have a CD burner if you want to copy your digital pictures to CD, a DVD player and a TV in the salon for viewing video.

Their photo pro, Mark Strickland, is one of the best.

Ocean Rover, April 2004, Harry A. Kreigh, Sacramento, CA. Nine-day trip in the Andaman Sea from Phuket with diving in Thailand (Similans, Surins and Richelieu Rock) and Myanmar (Mergui Archipelago). My overall rating for this dive trip is 4 (scale of 1 [worst] to 5 [best]) based on previous Indo-Pacific trips. Sunny, hot and dry (90 F) with light breezes and calm seas; water was usually around 82 F (though some cool currents were present at varying depths) and variable visibility from 30-100'. Mild currents at most sites. Large, steel-hulled stable boat with comfortable ride and minor engine noise; spacious salon (extensive library, CD/DVD player, satellite radio). There are four double cabins each on the main and upper decks; large cabins with bunk beds (lower bed is larger), ample storage space (including a large closet), reading lights, ensuite bathroom with shower, individual/adjustable air-conditioning unit, and windows for natural light. Daily maid service. There is a large sun deck on the upper level prior to the main meal, an early breakfast (toast, yogurt, cereal, fruit and juice) was available. All meals were buffet. Breakfast was usually served before the first dive and consisted of standard fare: eggs, meats and pancakes. At lunch and dinner, a variety of Thai cuisine (noodles, curries, and stir-fry dishes), vegetables, rice and salad, as well as some western choices, were offered. Dessert consisted of pie, custard or ice cream. Water,

soft drinks, tea, coffee, fruit and snacks were available 24 hours. Between the afternoon dives, baked snacks (cookies, brownies, and cakes) and blended fruit drinks/shakes were served. The normal dive schedule consisted of four day dives and a night dive.. Tanks were stored/filled in numbered racks on the dive platform, and personal gear was stored in bins below each tank or in nearby racks. Safety sausages were provided. Nitrox (32%) fills cost \$120 for the trip. All entries were made from 2 inflatable dinghies, and the drivers were usually prompt in reaching surfacing divers. There were two camera rinse buckets, two fresh water showers on the dive platform, and fresh towels were always available after each dive. Before and after dives, the crew was eager to assist divers with donning/removal of wetsuits/BCDs. At the end of the trip, they washed and dried our dive gear. The cruise director gave the briefings and led half of the divers, while a substitute divemaster led the group in the second dinghy. Dive briefings were very thorough and site drawings were detailed. Neither divemaster participated in the night dives. We dove sheer and sloping walls of islands and detached pinnacles, starting in the sandy rubble areas. The Similan sites consisted of either a collection of huge boulders with sparse coral or colorful fringing reefs/bommies over the sand. The maximum depth was usually 100' or less, and the coral/rock formations extended into the shallows for multi-level diving and safety stops. Multiple mantas (3-4) were repeatedly encountered during 4 dives at Black Rock, and a single

manta made several close passes at Koh Tachai. Several leopard sharks were observed at Fan Forest Pinnacle and Koh Bon. A few hawksbill turtles were seen. No whale sharks. Cephalopods were frequently seen and mating behavior was observed for cuttlefish and octopi. Among the most interesting or unusual species found here were: leaf scorpionfish, blue ribbon eel, rhinopias, seahorse, ornate ghost pipefish, harlequin shrimp, goby/shrimp pairs, long-nosed hawkfish, pipefish, banded sea krait, mantis shrimp, jawfish, porcelain crabs, orangutan crabs, fire dart fish, various nudibranchs, and cowries. Jacks, trevally, snappers, barracuda, batfish, fusiliers, filefish, angels (blue-ringed and yellow-masked), butterfly fish and triggerfish. The Thai crew provided top-notch personalized service voluntarily and with great pride. Several long-term employees remembered me from a trip 5 years ago! The corals and fish populations appeared healthier with fewer discarded fishing nets and much less rubble from dynamite fishing than previously seen. My primary reason for returning was to dive with Mark Strickland again. When I booked the trip 1 year in advance, I was told that Mark planned to be on the boat all season. However, three weeks prior to departure I was informed that he would not make the trip with us. The substitute Thai divemaster was competent, but not as skilled as Mark in leading dives or finding unusual critters. It was disappointing. The ladders on the dinghies — too short with narrow round steps — are a challenge for tall divers and should be replaced. We

opted to skip Burma Banks; silvertips have not been seen there regularly all season. The Wat Chalong temple is worth a visit. This extensive complex has some intricate and ornate sculptures and distinctive/colorful architecture. On the southwest side of Phuket, a scenic viewpoint overlooks Kata and Karon beaches. The observation deck at the lighthouse (Phromp Thep Cape) provides good views of the southern coast and surrounding islands. All of these sites can be visited in a 2-hour tour. I stayed at the Big A Resort (\$30/night), which has basic lodging with limited food service. The Palm Garden Resort (\$40/night), which is closer to the pier, is a better choice. Chalong doesn't offer much for tourists, certainly no pristine beaches there. On the return to Thailand waters, we made a short visit to the border town of Kawthaung, Myanmar for shopping and sightseeing. Poverty is evident and several street urchins politely accompanied us expecting a handout. There are vendors and markets, as well as an impressive temple, within walking distance from the dock. The local brew can be sampled at a nearby outdoor tavern, a welcome relief from the tropical heat and humidity.

Ocean Rover, April 2004, Joe Puglia (JPuglia@aol.com) Orlando, FL.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. The boat service is as good as advertised. This is the most effortless diving I've ever done. The crew was there for your every need. The cabins are large and comfortable with good size bathrooms. Sundeck is beautiful and spa-

acious. The food was outstanding; a mix of Thai and western food. There was always plenty to eat with enough variety that no one was disappointed. Beer and wine were extra. The diving was good to great. Richelieu Rock was fantastic! You could dive it all week and not see everything. Myanmar was nice although visibility was limited at times. Black Rock was my favorite. Trust the guides. At Twin Peaks one afternoon the dive was great, no current, mantas, octopus, sea snake etc. The next morning by the end of the dive it was flag pole diving on the mooring line. Critter sightings were great, Ribbon eels, mantas on ? the dives, leopard sharks, plenty of octopus (including a couple mating), cuttlefish, all varieties of nudis, lots and lots of tropicals including 6 line soapfish. All diving was from dinghies. Most days there were 5 dives available. On the two travel days only three. There was no need to find the boat as the dinghy drivers were right there when you surfaced. Nitrox 32 was offered for a small up charge and well worth it. Computers are required. It's a long trip from the US so give yourself a couple of days on shore to get acclimated. We spent a few days in Bangkok and a couple of days at the Chedi in Phuket. Both quite nice. Fantastic trip! UW Photography Comments: Good sized work and charging area. Ample storage and rinsing areas on dive deck. One PC for digital that can burn CD's.

Ocean Rover, July 2004, Jim Chubb (jimchubb@cox-internet.com) Ketchum, ID. Experience: 251-500

dives. Vis: 15 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 84 F, currents, no currents. On our 9 diving days we were in Lembeh, at strong currented Banca, up towards Mindanao in the Philippines into the seldom visited Sangihe archipelago, huge volcanoes and drop offs into open ocean. Then back south to dive the smoking Siau volcano's flanks, salt water hot springs, and onward to Bunaken, Manado Tua, and the flats south of Minhassa lagoon where in the grass 24 species of pelagic juvenile have been spotted, all the other critters typical of Lembeh, yellow and red sea horses galore, 3 species of seasnake, and a large obliging bright yellow rhinopias (holy grail) scorpionfish. The water is clearer here than Lembeh. Beautiful coral dense reefs packed with life everywhere on the cruise. Multiple varieties of everything, a lot of it very small. Some dives you flowed with currents others you could remain still. There are down currents and washing machine effects. You'd best learn reflexive buoyancy control. The viz never got crystalline but it was certainly good to very good except in Lembeh and in one lagoon in the Sangihe archipelago. Dramatic scenery. I wish I'd known how good the service would be as I would have brought along more cash than the usual 10%.

Scuba Cat, Scuba Adventure, April 2004, K C DenDooven (KCP-KCDD@aol.com) Las Vegas, NV.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 87 to 90 F, calm, currents. 10-day trip from two 4 day trips — with a transfer to their *Scuba Cat*

Indian Ocean and Red Sea

which operates shorter trips, in the Similian Islands. Then back to the Scuba Adventure for another 4 days. This way I went to Richeleau Rock twice. Seven sightings of giant mantas up close and personal! Leopard sharks. Currents were strong on some dives. Beginners might have problems. P J Widestrand the divemaster watched out for everybody. On one dive he told several to just hang out on the bow line: they saw 3 giant mantas — the rest of us saw 2! Great trip. Most divers used 3mm suits. I used a tee shirt. Water at 130 ft. was 81 F! Nitrox available on Scuba Adventure. First 4 days, congenial group from all over. 2nd 4-dayer B a quiet group almost no friendly conversations. My experiences was similar to one you published recently on another live-aboard out of Phuket. P J Widestrand, was an excellent video photog, and made DVDs after the trip for sale. No film processing lab on boat(s). (www.scubacat.com)

Viking of the Orient, January 2004,
Randy Howarth (rhowarth@
socal.rr.com) Huntington Beach,
CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, no currents. New beautiful custom boat designed and built by Scandinavian operator, Einar Meling, a fun loving and enthusiastic personality who loves his boat and his clients. Large and well designed dive deck; your gear is maintained at your station throughout your trip. Cameras are stored on special camera shelves. Hot showers on the deck. It is a short hop to the 10 double staterooms with your

own bathroom and windows and doors to the outside. The air conditioning was fantastic. On the next deck up are the Wheelhouse (with a padded platform for Thai massages) and the main saloon and outdoor area for lounging. Interior is beautiful crafted wood 34" TV, DVD, CD VCR and white board for fun dive briefings On the huge upper deck are mattresses for sun tanning or lying out under the stars. The Scandinavian and Thai crew is fun and helpful and make for a fantastic diving trip experience. The diving — fantastic. Start off with a light breakfast while getting a dive briefing then into the water. Come out back on board to a buffet of eggs, omelets, bacon, fruit etc. Then off to another dive and then a great lunch then go ashore to the most beautiful white sand beaches in the world and perhaps a hike to a lookout point. Back in the water at a new site. A great dinner then a night dive. Five day trip; dove at the Similan Islands, Koh Bon, Koh Tachai and Richelieu Rock. So many lion fish you stop looking, leopard and black tip sharks, trevally, garden eels, moray eels, rays, frog fish, sea horses, cuttlefish and all the thousands of small tropical fish fill the water and coral. Great coral and sponges. Not as spectacular as Komodo but still incredible diving. You often see other divers in the water or anchored nearby at night. We did not see a whale shark or a manta. Reasonably priced. (www.viking-live-aboards.com)

www.undercurrent.org