

nami we went to Koh Lanta, south of Phuket. Koh Tao was represented to us as appropriate for “experienced divers.” Crystal clear waters, beautiful reefs, beautiful facilities, whale sharks abound — all false advertising. The visibility was a murky 30’ at best, the reefs are in terrible shape, there were hardly any fish, and the dive operation crude and amateurish. They cater to beginning divers. There are many dive operations on the island, way too many divers and the facilities and equipment was inadequate. Grand Coral Diver’s Resort looks good in the pamphlets but fails upon closer scrutiny. These facilities were the most expensive and the poorest accommodations during our four weeks in Thailand. We stayed only two days, having dived twice one morning, and returned to Bangkok to regroup. We did discover a marvelous resort/spa in northern Thailand in the Chiang Rai Province called Phu Chaisai Mountain Resort.

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## INDIAN OCEAN AND RED SEA LIVE-ABOARDS

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### INDONESIA

**Adventure Komodo, January 2005, Sherry Wren, Palo Alto, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F., calm, choppy. The Raja Ampats are outstanding. The diversity of fish and corals is amazing. Larry Smith runs all of the dive operations and is the master planner, diver, and dinner companion. We started out of Sorong and dove Batanta, went

to Kofiau where the species diversity counts were performed, Deer Island, Waigo, Wayag, Gam, Melissa’s reef, Wagnab, and Batanta again. Highlights were incredible wobbegongs ( up to 6-7ft) on many dives, ghost pipe fish, scorpion fish, mandarin fish, pygmy sea horses ( 5 on one fan alone), oscillated flounders, emperor shrimps, leaf scorpions, blue ring octopus, cephalopods, a billion different nudibranchs, and more fish than could be believed. This was not a place for pelagics. Melissa’s reef and Batanta Southwest were virtual fish highways. Nitrox was available and no limits on dives. My typical profile was max depth 90 and dive times of 70 minutes. 4 dives a day were offered. The boat service was outstanding, you could have American or Indonesian breakfast cooked to your order daily. It did take 2 days for the Indonesian chef to believe I could eat food as spicy as I wanted it. Lunch and dinner was by Holgar a German chef with a lot of continental experience. Dinner was served like a nice restaurant with free flowing wine from the owners’ vineyard. Vegetarian guests were accommodated. Cabins were OK, they are strangely elevated to a level that is difficult to get into, this allows for unbelievable storage space under them. You do not have a private head but each two cabins share a head with the upstairs cabins using the facility on the dive deck. Boat was clean, crew was attentive and professional. We did a Bird of Paradise walk into the jungle to see these magnificent birds do their morning dance, unfortunately a sea eagle landed on the tree and stopped the action. Another excursion was a wine and cheese cruise through rock

islands with orchids, hornbills, pitcher plants, and scenery. The best trip was to one of the largest caves I have seen, if it was in the US this would be a five star destination just to see the formations. An excursion to a working pearl farm did not work out. UW Photography Comments: Excellent for small critters, nice camera table, crew was excellent with the cameras.

**Adventure Komodo, H2O, April 2005, Sally Schroeder (s72767@yahoo.com), Port Orange, FL.** Experience: 1000+ dives. I had been on this boat last year in Raja Ampat (fantastic area), so I knew diving with Larry Smith was great. The boat is well laid out and comfortable. I asked prior to booking who beside Larry would be diving with us. I was told the boat had a new lady photo pro as the 2nd dive guide. I had no desire to dive with the boat owner's nephew, who last year was banned from diving with guests (at the insistence of the guests) because he mishandled equipment and forgot to wear either a watch or computer while diving. Guess who is the other diving guide? The nephew. Larry said the photo pro had left. I had only booked 2 months prior and would not have booked knowing this. 45% of my dives were with Larry. Always a pleasure. 41% of my dives were with the jerk nephew: was still in bed asleep while guests are geared up waiting to leave for a dive, takes off with the cook on a dive and his guests didn't even see his bubbles the entire dive, forgot to fill his own tank for my night dive. Traveled to Kupang, West Timor-Wakatobi, SE Sulawesi. Larry chose to use this trip to train his secretary Widya, a lovely Balinese gal, to

dive. He spent 10 dives with her. On 8 of these his guests were taken elsewhere to dive with the nephew in a different dinghy. First day I told Larry that I hoped to do 5 dives daily (as last year), when the boat's movement schedule would allow. Larry's response was "NO, that's not what we are offering". He backed down only begrudgingly. I was the only diver to do any night dives. I dove with the housekeeper, the dinghy driver the marine park representative and the cook, all as my "dive guide"! The dinghy driver was good! I dove every time I was allowed and managed 49 dives on this 14 day trip. Last year's 9 day trip I did 43 dives, the boat's attitude then was quite different. On 3 occasions Larry forced his dive guests to choose between a morning dive and a shore visit. At 2 places the boat sat for 30+ hours next to the shore "attraction". Wasn't this a dive trip? 1 village visit and a market day visit were fitted between dives nicely, which I enjoyed. I had dived this Wakatobi area before. I knew it has some drop gorgeous diving walls. Larry and the boat had never been to this dive area. As far as they were concerned the Wakatobi part was an exploratory trip. I showed them on the charts in detail where I knew of great walls. The boat only went to 1 site in the area I knew to be great. We got skunked on pygmy sea horses. I had probably seen at least 50 last trip to this area. But we did not go to these sites. We were only able to visit 2 of the outlying islands as the weather did not cooperate. Hoge Island had the worst diving of the trip. We spent 4 days repeatedly diving the same crummy sites (super silty vis 3-4 meters and nearly

dead bombed out reefs and wall). On the trips last overnight passage the captain joined us after dinner for 2 glasses of wine. Then he steered the boat all the rest of the night! Did the 12 hour drinking rule not apply to the operator of a licensed Australian charter boat? Delightful Indonesian staff. All taking pride in their jobs, all with excellent English skills. Really liked those 70-80 minute bottom times. Diving around Alor / Pantar areas was fantastic. Larry knows this area. Icy cold waters, great variety of bottom types, conditions and critters, quiet to raging currents also. Nice black sand site under the boat at 1 place with tiny dragonets and lots of snake eels and a little wonderpus and a bubble shell nudie and 2 Pegasus sea moths: another entire dive with blasting current sweeping us past and entire 80 minutes of nothing but a bottom covered with sea anemones and clownfish....beautiful. Wide variety of nudis, including my find of a solar powered nudie! in one of those bombed out otherwise D rated sites. Lots of leaffish, frogfish and pipefish. I found 1 orange giant frogfish the size of a persons head. Several spectacular walls of sea fans, soft corals and good fish life with 30 meter + vis. Entire fields of beautiful cabbage corals at 1 site. One especially nice grass flats area in front of the town of Wanji Wanji where I must have seen 70-80 green pipefish over several dives + 2 frogfish and other good finds all in less than 4 meters depth. Diving with the dinghy drive Ali was great as he was a good spotter and enjoyed diving. Weather varied; lots of gray overcast, drippy rain and unhelpful wind directions, 4-5 days forced dive plans to

change and hole-up in less than ideal diving areas. Little attempt was made by the operator to try other diving locals during the day and return to the "safe mooring" at night. Many reef slopes in the 12-20 meter vis range. perhaps 50% of the dives had serious, but not difficult currents, some 10% dive sites we were swept at speeds where photos were just not possible (great dives none the less!), other sites had nearly zero current so you could dink along where ever you wished. Water around Alor and nearby sites.. Frigid 16-18 C or high 60 F, most other sites areas were 24-26 C or 78-82 F. Farmer Jane + jacket of either 3/2 or 5/2mm. Diving was within recreational limits only. Profile was up to each diver. Diving was restricted as to time you were allowed to enter the water. On several occasions I was told to wait for 1 1/2 hours prior to being allowed to dive off the dinghy tied to the back of the boat, even when this was "the dive site", and my gear was setup and sitting in the dinghy. A dive before the "group departure" at 8:30 was never allowed. A 3rd dive instead of the posted 2 1/2 — 3 hour lunch interval was never allowed, even though the boat was anchored at the die site. 12 hour no diving after drinking rule. Saw pilot whales on the surface during a passage, dolphins during several passages, 1-10 sharks, no mantas, no whale sharks, 1-10 turtles. Accommodations: clean and comfortable with the exception of the 2-3 cockroaches nightly (I was across from the galley) after dive cold drinks or hot cocoa even in the gray rain were nice Wine with dinner was nice. Being a vegetarian I had requested fish nightly and salads for lunches. Salads were

dull. When fresh fish was served it was excellent but with only an artful spoon of sauce draped over the fish and plain white rice. I asked for Asian sauces, but the cook was more interested in diving. This German cook was heavily into pasta and plates were always artfully presented. Soups were good. Desserts were great. One dinner ... plain green lettuce (what I had for lunch) and 6 kinds of cold meats and brie. When I asked for my fish, I was given a plate with several slices of cheddar cheese for my dinner. Snacks: candy bars in the fridge or bags of beef flavored chips or peanuts. Two times we were served packaged long life pound cake, once fried donuts and a heavy fruit bread once. There were only 3 guests so I guess that my veggie food was too much bother many times. Most days lunch was served more than an hour after we surfaced from the 2nd dive. Nitrox was available. The 2 dinghy drivers were great. Ready, on time, professional attitude, always a helping hand. Many time they snorkeled overhead and pointed out critters! Ships maintenance was excellent with a hard working 1st mate able and eager to assist if you had gear that needed attention. lap top computer available to guests for photo checking / CD burning etc. In each cabin table surface with multiple AC outlets for charging. Both 110VAC and 240VAC. Separate wash barrel with clean water on dive deck. Central to dive deck shady 1 table maybe 100cm by 140 cm, or 3' by 4' with a bottom shelf was the only "not in your cabin" area. If you had a full boat this area would seem to be small! With the exception of 1 person, Crew handled camera gear carefully. maybe 25% of

dives had such high levels of silt that photo subjects were much decreased.

**AquaOne, July 2005, Linda Rutherford, Montara, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 17 to 65 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. Four dives a day: 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 2:30 and 6 p.m. We tried to fit in five dives, but with shallow, long dives (sometimes 80 minutes) we decided not to rush to do more. Everyone was satisfied. They divided us into two groups of seven divers, each group with two divemasters. I wore a 2.5 mil suit, a hood and a 3-mil neoprene vest. But I tend to chill. Most people wore hoods, but not the vest. Most muck diving was in Lembeh Straits, and most of the coral was at Bangka island. My favorite dives were at Bangka island, California Dreaming, Pulau Putus, Angel's Window, and Nudi Falls. The food was tasty and enjoyable. Hot snacks and appetizers after the afternoon dives. The kitchen is tiny, with only two people. The main cook is a humble Chinese man who turns out great variety. The boat crew is outstanding. They help passengers in inflatables. The rides are two to five minutes to get precisely to the dive site and for individual pick up after dive. I had never seen fish "walk" before, or seen frogfish "swim." I loved the numerous scorpionfish and devilfish disguised as coral. I wish I had known in advance just how small these rare sea creatures are, so, I would have bought my husband a super-duper macro lens. A 4x or more would have helped. I did seem a bit absurd to see seven divers attempting simultaneously to see, photograph, and video, something smaller than my baby finger nail. The

pygmy seahorse is smaller than that. I was shown about six pygmy seahorses by the guides. After the live-aboard, we stayed at Lembeh Resort, a good option with great facilities for camera work. We also stayed at the nice Santika Hotel in Manado, diving the Bunaken reef. The Thalassa dive operation at Santika was ok not as good as AquaOne or Lembeh Resort. After the low vis of Lembeh Straits, I was shocked to see the clear water of Bunaken, over 125 foot vis. Thalassa sites are mostly wall dives in current, so photography is more difficult. Perhaps other dives could be made by special request.

**Diving 4 Images, KM Ciska, May 2005, Dave Van Rooy (dvanrooy@seabelow.com), Ubud, Bali.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F., calm, currents. Exploratory trip to Halmahera, the big island between Sulawesi and Papua. There are no dive operators around at all. Graham Abbott of Diving 4 Images ([www.diving4images.com](http://www.diving4images.com)), the trip leader, had chartered the Ciska and asked a local diving group to join. He had acquired a few good pointers about where there was some potentially good diving. I'd expected lots of bombed out reefs, but we encountered few. 90% of the reefs were pristine reefs with fish and coral life extremely prolific. We had some dives with so many large schools of fish, we lost track. Sharks, usually black tips in the 4-6 foot length, were abundant (2-10 seen on most dives), with some gray reef and white tips and some epaulet sharks. Other highlights included schools of skip jack, tuna, unicorn fish, anthias (10 times more abundant than I've ever seen), fusiliers,

rainbow runners, surgeon fish, long and short fin bannerfish, sweet lips, bump-head parrots, a few Napoleon wrasse, red-tooth trigger fish, blue-stripe barracuda, black-banded angelfish and lots more. We dove several sea mounts, sometimes with strong currents and people got separated. No real strong up or down currents tho. Critters, not as much as the Komodo area but still lots: ornate and robust ghost pipefish, blue ribbon eels, Saron shrimp, mantis shrimp, bobtail squid, a few pygmy sea horses, blue ring octopus, orangutan crabs, soft coral crabs. And there's lots of healthy corals, both hard and soft. The Ciska is a 73-foot comfortable and seaworthy boat with a good crew that is based out of Makasar, Sulawesi. We were crowding 12 divers on it, but the price was exceptionally good. Each of us had a small bunk bed with little storage space in the 4 rooms available (one room with 6 single beds) Two toilets at the rear served all of us plus the 9 crew (no hot water). Not luxury diving by any means. The owner is Belgian so he has a well-trained chef, the food was generally pretty good, with three large meals/day. They had one tender boat and a well-trained crewman who picked us up. Most dives were done from the tender, tho several off the Ciska itself. No Nitrox. We started from Ternate, the capital of Halmahera, a major centers of the spice trading in the 15th and 16th centuries. Our course took us south to the Goraichi islands, Patinti Straits and around Bacan and some nearby islands. Many islands are sparsely inhabited and the mountainous landscape is covered with virgin rain forest, with a few scattered palm

tree plantations. Lots of exotic bird life flying about, including cockatoos, sea eagles, horn bills, a number of species of parrots and related birds. Volcanoes, most of the classical conic shape, are abundant. Just south of Ternate, we could see 4 volcanic islands in a row, the furthest two being perfectly conical (one is pictured on the 1,000 Rupiah note in Indonesia), with the last two having been such, but eons ago having blown their tops. Usually we did 4 dives/day including night dives every night. We only had 4.5 days diving for us due to airline problems getting there and leaving. BTW, Graham's partner Dwi did an excellent job rebooking everyone's ticket as two airlines had cancelled all of our flights out of Ternate — we all managed to get off on schedule. Graham did lots of scouting to find good dive spots tho often the charts were not so good. He's one of the best critter spotters around. Lots of live-aboard operators in the area are interested in the diving here, as the location between Raja Ampat and Manado (Lembah Straits and Bunaken) is both logistically viable and opens up new diving opportunities. So expect this to show up on some live-aboards' schedules in the near future. UW Photography Comments: A couple small rinse tanks. Tho there were about 9 UW photogs, most had small digital setups, so room not a big problem for us.

**Dive Komodo, August 2004, Greg Heighes (gregindo@indosat.net.id), Denpasar, Bali.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Meters. Water: 22 to 28 Celsius, calm. Quality operation on a quality live-aboard ( AC and en suite facilities) at a good price. Only operator

of this class to run out of Labuan Bajo; trip was spent in the Komodo national park Other operator run out from Bali. Diving is excellent, food was great, tenders are good also. Atmosphere was relaxed, and diving operations ran smoothly. Good fun and good diving all round. They also have a shore based operation out of Labuan Bajo.

**Grand Komodo Tours and Dives, Tarata, Temukira, Putri Papua, September/October 2004, Bob & Pat Watson, (pwatson@brightok.net) Grand Lake, OK.** Vis: 45 to 100 ft. Water: calm and currents, 75 — 85F. One of the best opportunities to dive in the eastern waters of Indonesia, in pristine areas at reasonable prices. After reading Dr. Jose Duran's review in the Chapbook, we booked a six week trip with three consecutive dive trips to Komodo, Wakatobi and Raja Ampat areas, with ten days in Bali for sightseeing, all arranged by Komodo Tours and Dives. Top performing operation, with a well staffed and equipped office in Sanur on Bali. Charming owners are Nyoman and Reno Kirtya, whose capable staff met your every need. (The hotels they arranged were excellent; the intimate Puri Mesari in Sanur, and impressive Pertiwi Bungalows in Ubud.) The lack of language barrier, alone, is good reason to go with Komodo Tours. During our six weeks (especially in airports), they took care of details that could have posed problems for us without their intervention. GKT&D has four boats. They are kept at the islands they serve, eliminating the long boat rides from Bali (18 hours to Komodo!). Short flights to the islands. Four dives a day including a night dive. The boats are designed

by Nyoman Kirtya after many years building and operating dive boats. They are stable, Indonesian style wooden boats, well appointed and maintained. Each cabin has en suite bathroom with shower, air-conditioning, and excellent reading lights over the beds. Cabins are small, but adequate. On the three larger boats, there are large aft dive platforms, with baskets under each person's station for gear storage, camera tables, and large rinse tanks. You never touch your gear unless you want to. We are in our seventies. It is difficult for us to walk with tanks. They were handed down into the hard sided inflatable tender by one crew member to another (or put right onto us in a seated position if diving from the platform) where all we did was buckle up and roll into the water. Cameras are handed down. Dive groups were usually three or four, never more than five, with two divemasters for most dives. With my "grandmother gray" hair, I was carefully looked after at all times. Divers who indicated their ability were free to explore on their own. Everyone was trusted to manage their own air intelligently, so that Peggy (Dr. Duran's wife, whom we suspect has gills) was often down for an hour and a half or more, with no problem. David Fleetham, famed underwater photographer (over 100 magazine covers, and a prince of a fellow!) was on the Raja Ampat boat, and with others, spent most of the time solo diving. Some of us enjoyed following one of the two divemasters for their excellent critter-finding expertise. The crews are wonderful. The cooks hover at mealtimes to make sure that everything is satisfactory, beaming when

praised. Meals are informal, a tasty (and plentiful!) variety of Asian and western fare. Snacks and smoothies are served between every dive. (Deep fried bananas with honey are great) Large collection of fish identification books, including the two volume set (on every boat!) of the new, huge and extremely expensive "Indonesian Reef Fish." If you have been told by Lorenz, owner of the Wakatobi Resort, that dive boats are not allowed in the area (as I was during my early internet explorations of Wakatobi diving), be assured that Komodo Tours has been going there since 2003. We even toured the village. The divemaster registers with local authorities, and makes regular, albeit unsuccessful attempts to meet with Lorenz to build good will. When the local police boat, perhaps bribed, came out and boarded our boat, telling us we had to leave anyway (a regular occurrence, which has caused many a non-Indonesian boat to leave the area: See the 2005 Chapbook, p.412, the French Mona Lisa), our divemaster spoke with them at great length, and finally everyone was smiling, the "officials" left, and we stayed. The divemaster's knowledge of the language and customs, as well as his excellent diplomacy, allowed us to experience incredible diving, where other boats have been turned away. Grand Komodo Tours and Dives never cancels a trip due to low bookings. The only other divers on the Komodo trip were three Japanese lads. The Durans have made eight or nine trips with Komodo Tours. GKT&D has a loyal following of repeat divers. With multiple boats and areas served, even Raja Ampat, divers are able to schedule two or more con-

secutive trips, making the long flight to Indonesia worthwhile. Try not to miss the traditional Hindu home compound tour, the Holy Water Temple for ritual bathing, and the beautiful Tanah Lot Temple by the sea, which is in the sea at high tide, where you can visit a sand cave housing a den of banded sea snakes that the children love to touch! (We were told that no one has ever been bitten there!) Monkey Forest was fun, and the volcano and lake in the mountains are worth the trip. Ubud for shopping: we stayed four days. GKT&D completed 2 dive explorations to the Wrecks of Mankwari (West Papua) and to the Banda Islands. These destinations will be added to their 2006 schedule. As for marine life, highlights include the number and size of the almost tame mantas in Komodo's Manta Alley, as well as Komodo's beautiful walls and bommies (and the Komodo dragons in the National Park!), Raja Ampat's prehistoric appearing wobbegong sharks, crocodile fish and scorpion fish (so many varieties!) and Wakatobi's beautiful and unusual critters and coral of every description. We rarely ever saw another dive boat. We felt Indonesia outdid Fiji by a long shot. The Kirtyas had mentioned a number of experts who had been diving with them. Dr. Gerald Allen, author of more than twenty books on tropical fish; Dr. Jack Randall, marine biologist and top fish expert for the Indo-Pacific region; Dr. Kal Muller, author of "Underwater Indonesia/Diving Indonesia", Maurine Shimlock and Burt Jones, award winning marine-live Photojournalists and authors of "Secret Sea", Mike R. Severns who authored "Sulawesi Seas". [www.komodoalordive.com](http://www.komodoalordive.com)

**Grand Komodo Dive Tours, October 2004, Lee and Phyllis Thé (plthe@att.net), Palo Alto, CA.** Experience: 228 dives. Vis: 40-80 feet. Water: 74-81 F, calm and fairly flat but multidirectional currents up to 10k in places. Plankton-rich waters and upwellings support the fabulous ecosystem at some cost in visibility. We could dive our own profile, but don't empty the tank! Sharks: a few (mainly gray and white tip reef sharks). Mantas: a squadron on one dive. Turtles: 3-4 (loggerheads I think). One dive on a bombed reef, but elsewhere soft coral was beguiling—masses of corals that look like flowers that are constantly opening/closing. Hugely diverse and abundant fish; clouds of anthias in many sites, many rarities, including pygmy seahorses, stargazers, ribbon eels, fire dartfish, foxface, small-scale scorpionfish, red firefish, leaf scorpionfish, coral cod, barramundi cod, unicorn fish. Nudibranch-o-rama! (pleurobranchs and a coriocyte), sea pens, sea cucumbers, hordes of crinoids, spaghetti worms, shrimp, lobsters, box crabs, reef cuttlefish, octopus, bobtail squid, giant clam, banded sea snakes (ditto). Saw a giant trevally, sharks, morays, some huge puffers, teira batfish, emperor angelfish, orange-lined triggerfish, clown triggerfish, redtooth triggerfish, titan triggerfish, blue-spotted stingray. Two freshwater tanks used for cameras, masks, lights. Convenient, dry platform for cameras. No development facilities onboard, but you should be shooting digital by now. Good handling for cameras. Plus I lost my UW camera getting into the dinghy, didn't realize it until we'd returned to the boat and yet one of the divemasters

was able to retrace our steps, take the current into account, drop down and find it! Plus the captain and divemasters were locals who excelled at finding the special stuff to shoot. Dual divemasters and dive your own profile situation gave photographers the freedom they need to get the good shots. Excellent for available light digital photography. Greatest species diversity in the world—at least 3X that of the Caribbean. We come back from Komodo dives going “Holy cow—did you see THAT???” On the other hand, bomb fishing, cyanide fishing and just plain overfishing limit just where you can go and still enjoy this diversity. Indonesia established a national park there and actually enforces the fishing ban in its waters. So Komodo joins legendary locales like Papua New Guinea and the Coral Sea, with one big difference: it costs about half as much—under \$3K/person for us including airfares to Bali and then to Sumbawa, transfers, hotels, all meals, the live-aboard, stopovers in Bali and Hong Kong—everything. And this wasn’t roughing it—we had good AC and western-style toilets everywhere we stayed, and four-star hotels in Bali. You only get those amazing soft corals and hugely abundant/diverse life in general at the price of sometimes fierce, sometimes unpredictable currents and cold water upwellings, and you’re a long, long ways from the nearest compression chamber. You don’t have to be a jock (several of our group had physical limitations, in fact), but you do have to be experienced and know what to do in sometimes powerful multidirectional currents, and be prepared for waters sometimes as cold as 71 F below

the thermocline. Only the divemasters spoke English, most of the meals were Indonesian, and the boat certainly wasn’t luxurious. We had en suite bathrooms and tepid water showers (though you must brush your teeth with bottled water), room for luggage, 220V outlet. Amenities included a saltwater bidet, and non-fussy toilets. And the bed was comfortable and queen-sized. Cabins for singles had bunk beds. The boat was purpose-built for scuba diving, with the best water entry from a mother ship that I’ve encountered, and clean fills, and a big oxygen tank no one had to use, thank heavens. We did some dives from the boat’s dinghy, which was fiberglass and had a decent ladder and a great dinghyman. The AC went out in one cabin during the trip, but the owners ferried out a replacement unit a day or two later. The dinghy motor nearly stopped coming back from one night dive, but managed to get us back. It worked fine afterwards. We brought a group of eight, with two more joining us on the boat, which has a capacity of 12 divers. The boat has a two-volume set of books on Indonesian fish that we found useful. There’s also a smallish color TV set into the wall of the lounge/dining room. The crew was attentive during dive operations but not fanatical. Usually we’d go sit on one of the two giant stride entry areas near the bow; crewmen would put our rigs on our back, and off we’d go. We had two divemasters (Weka and Gusti—ask for them) with us on most dives, which added to the comfort factor. My wife and I went rather shallow on many dives while keeping a divemaster in sight downslope, and

they were comfortable with that. On a 10-day trip 28 dives were possible (one night dive was canceled due to excessive current—that would have made 29), and I did all of them. The schedule was four dives a day: dive first thing in the morning, eat breakfast, dive midmorning, eat lunch, dive mid-afternoon, have a snack, do a night dive as soon as it's dark, eat dinner. Considerable surface intervals—a good idea in remote areas. The itinerary included a morning visit to Komodo Island to see the Komodo dragons up close and personal. A park ranger comes along to help find the dragons. He's armed with a forked stick, which ours said usually works. We also saw the deer and peccaries the dragons feed on, as well as various birds and orchids. This is dry country and we were there at the end of the dry season, and my wife and I encountered no mosquitoes—none—anywhere on the trip. So we didn't take any antimalarial drugs. We did the 10 day trip (a 7 day is also possible), which adds a jaunt to Sangeang, a mile-high volcanic cone northwest of the park waters. Dove on bubbling sands, and the volcanic ash-colored substrate made a great backdrop for photography. Most dive operators run their boats out of Bali, which necessitates a long run to Komodo. Komodo Grand Tours has you fly from Denpasar to Bima, using domestic carrier Merpati Air, flying a modern Fokker jetliner reminiscent of a McDonnell-Douglas MD80 Komodo Grand Tours picked us up at the airport in Bali and skillfully shepherded us every step of the way to/from our destination. We picked KGT originally thanks to Undercurrent's annual

Travelin' Divers Chapbook, Thanks, Undercurrent! Dive operation: Grand Komodo Tours and Dives (<http://www.komodoalordive.com>) American Agent: AquaLine, LLC (<http://www.dive-aqua-sports.com>) (303-641-3953/Toll Free: 888-996-2782).

**Grand Komodo Tours, March 2005, Charles Menbeck (blusky79@aol.com), Chicago, IL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 72 to 79 F., currents. Booked directly at Grand-KomodoTours.com. Paid \$1100/person for 7 day Komodo live-aboard on the smaller Nusa Tera boat (fan only, with 2 shared rest rooms for the boat). Pleasant at night when we slept on the deck with the stars. Restrooms adequate. Rate included inter island flights to/from the seaport, which they handle. The boat looks bigger and better in person than on the website. The cabins were clean and beautifully decorated with the woods and carvings. It was recently painted topside with new nonslip rubber mats throughout the deck. A clean, well-maintained boat. We became the only guests as other guests canceled due to flight delays. It was nice to have the boat and friendly helpful crew to ourselves. However, we were switched to the bigger more modern MV Putri Papua boat (a/c and bathrooms in every cabin) after 3 2 days due to scheduling. They gave us the owners cabin on that boat, which was great. The food was Indonesian/Asian. Rice and more rice, plenty of fruit, hot tea and fruit smoothies after the dives. They mixed in fresh fish, chicken, and pork here and there with the rice dishes. When we boarded, we did our check out dives 2 hours later as

we were already in the Komodo area. Topside scenery was nice as all the dives were around 3 islands. Parked in coves at night to sleep. It was remote. Thermoclines that dropped the water temp from 79 degrees to 72 degrees. Visibility wasn't the best. Some dives were mediocre while some were simply fabulous (Batu Balong aka "Current City"). It reminded me of the Blue Corner in Palau. Hammerhead Sharks, Manta Rays, schools of fish blocking out the sunlight while diving on a wall that went to within 10 feet of the surface. Profuse hard and soft corals loaded on the wall. Three pinnacles above and below. In between were currents, but not bad. The hard and soft corals were in top shape. Hammerhead sharks, manta rays, sting rays as well as plenty of schools of fish, big and small. Lots of macro. Did 3 macro photo night dives. Saw the cuttlefish changing colors. Not easy diving, for the adventurous really. I was in the mood for easier diving. We visited the Komodo Dragon for a 3 hour hike on Komodo island. We spotted about 6 in their natural surroundings. Air fills were 3000+ psi while quite a few were in the 2750 psi range. I needed to clarify that with the crew as I am a bit of an air hog and do not need to be short changed on the air on a challenging dive. Crew was pretty good. Professional run operation. They'll pick you up at the airport and make sure your transfers go smoothly to your hotel. We stayed at a nice hotel, the Parigata Resort (\$40/night) in Sanur (quieter than touristy Kuta) while waiting for our connecting flight to the seaport (Labuan Bajo). The culture in Bali was fantastic. The hotel was surrounded by

walls in the Hindu tradition. Pool had a waterfall with luscious landscaping. Rooms had great a/c and lots of stone tile throughout, wood trim. Restaurant had good food and reasonable prices. Rented a car with driver for \$40 for a day (Romeo, English Speaking Driver, cell:081-338-759-653, home: 0361-289-380) when we returned back to Bali. Went north to see the volcanoes, the coastline, the rice fields (terraced) and the historical Hindu Temples. Great touring. Very hot and humid in Bali (90 degrees plus with 80%+ humidity). UW Photography Comments: The MV Petri Papua boat had a nice photo table in back by the equipment area. Nice rinse tank too. That was helpful.

**Grand Komodo Tours, SMY Temukira, March 2005, Arief Irwan Latif (arief\_latif@fmi.com), Kuala Kencana, Papua.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 28 to 29 Celsius, choppy, currents, no currents. Diving in Raja Ampat was fantastic. Although it was my first live-aboard I was satisfied with the service, diving, food and affordability. I did 23 dives and that was because I had to sit out 1.5 days due to ear infection. Visibility was not great, but this is always a trade off with profusion of fish and other sea creatures. Healthy, beautiful and diverse corals, abundance of tropical fish, Mantas and nudibranchs. Grand Komodo Tours facilitated seven people from my company, four of which were from the same department. The trip was originally listed as a 10 day tour, however GKT was accommodating enough to allow six of the seven people a 7 day trip and they provided additional boat charter to take them to the port of entry at no additional

charge. The first 2 days of diving were a little rough, mainly because we had extremely strong currents. Even though we had prepared reef hooks, having a video camera on such strong currents, it was often too difficult to manage. This was the type of current that flutter and flood your mask and threaten to pull regulators of your mouth. The dive master he was more than happy to fine tune the timing so that we would not be diving in such strong currents. The rest of the dives were fantastic. Most sites are sloping reefs, sea mounds or rock island formation. The health and variety of corals were excellent. Several mantas were seen up close, at Manta International Airport. Another came right towards me after a safety stop at Magic rock. At Manta point there was 20 minutes of mantas hovering towards, next to or above me. Other creatures crocodile fish, wobbegong sharks (almost at every site), banded sea snakes, flatworms, schooling jacks, schooling snappers and sweetlips, scorpion fish, hawksbill turtles, black and white reef sharks, epaulette sharks (shy) barracudas, dogtooth tunas, Spanish mackerels, Napoleon wrasse and families of bumphead parrotfish. At the last dive there more than 20 species of nudibranch, two of which we could not find in the guide books. The only thing lacking was substantial shark action. We were allowed to dive our own profile. Briefing before each dive was given and the only guideline imposed was to have the reef either on your left or right side. There were 2 divemasters, however they had to attend to several of the less experience divers. Dives were mostly step off the dive platform from the main vessel,

zodiacs were used occasionally for sites too shallow to reach. The zodiac was extremely efficient at picking up divers. The longest I had to wait was 1 minute. Food was plentiful and tasty. Before the first dive at 7:30, most of us helped ourselves to tea and coffee with cereal or fruits. Breakfast consisting of banana pancakes, sausages, toast, scrambled eggs, or egg salad, with water melon, orange, or banana shake after the first dive. Lunches and dinners were combinations of rice with at least 3 main courses and deserts. Several nights we had fresh sushi. Fresh baked cakes or cookies were available after the third dive. Coffee, cocoa, milk, tea, bottled water and fruits were free. Beer and soft drinks were extra. All buffet style, Nico the cook was excellent at keeping the variety. Traditional wooden schooner converted into a live-aboard. It was probably about 27 meters long and 7 meters wide. Each room had its own a/c and bathroom. No hot shower. The tight space was not a problem because it was cleaned daily and the towel was replaced every 2 days. The crew was fantastic. Captain Abu Bakar was always spot on in finding the sites. Chris the head divemaster spoke adequate English and was helpful. The rest of the crew was quiet but polite and accommodating. The vessel was equipped with radar, gps, depth sounder, radio and satellite telephone. It also had first aid and oxygen. The television and DVD player however were rather old and did not provide quality pictures needed to view videos and digital pictures. UW Photography Comments: The main camera table is at the main dining area and is enough for about 3

fully geared photo and videographers. It had 4 or 5 small lockers next to the camera table; however these were too small to store a whole set equipment (cameras, batteries, lights, arms and accessories). The dive platform provided slightly bigger space for cameras and another shelf below, which was mostly packed with some tools and gear. Two small rinse tanks were available at the dive deck and the water was replaced regularly.

**Grand Komodo Dive Tours, June 2005, Mel Cundiff (Cundiff@Colorado.edu), Boulder, CO.**

Nine of us went for eleven days on the MV Putri Papua, a live-aboard in the fleet of Grand Komodo Tours and Dives, operating out of Bali. Our trip was booked by Nancy Gimblan of Scuba Travel Ventures in San Diego. The 84-foot-long, 19-foot beam Putri Papua is a modified wooden Indonesian pinise boat with five cabins accommodating eleven divers and a crew of eight. Each cabin has its own bathroom and shower and is air-conditioned. Cabins are cramped but have adequate storage space for travel cases, clothes and personal items. Breakfasts were dry cereal, eggs, bacon, sausage, toast, pancakes, banana crepes, and lots of fruit and juices, lunches and dinners were Southeast Asian, built around rice or noodles with lots of fish and shrimp. Toward the end of the trip the crew caught a tuna and we had sashimi. Potable drinking water was plentiful as were such drinks as hot/cold tea, coffee, lemonade. Soft drinks and local beer were a nominal cost. Common areas on the boat included a forward sundeck with a retractable shade cover; a forward inside dining area that we

never used, an open aft dining area with quick-drop sides and a TV monitor with a DVD/CD player, a dive deck with eleven diver and two divemaster stations with ample gear-storage space, a camera table (no E-6 film processing), a large camera rinse tank, two showers and a toilet. Wet suits and skins were hung on racks along the sides of the boat. Halfway through the trip the Putri Papua replenished the freshwater used for washing, cleaning and showers from a stream on an uninhabited island. For all but a half day we had clear blue sky and smooth water. All cabins and common areas are connected to one another via outside passages, so when it rains one gets wet moving from one area to another. While on a few occasions we entered the water via the aft dive platform, most entries and exits were from a large fiberglass-reinforced zodiac. It had an attached, throw-down ladder for exits. If a diver wished, the tank and BC could be brought in before exiting the water. There was ample crew to help us when necessary and to handle our gear and fill our tanks. There was no Nitrox. One was a nondiver, so the dive deck had plenty of space, and on a few occasions all eight of us plus two divemasters and a boat person could be transported in the zodiac at once. Four dives per day, entirely adequate. We had three dives during the daytime and managed to get in nine night dives on our trip. On one of them we encountered small, four-inch long sea wasps. They were a nuisance and aggressively swam toward our lights, but we all wore skins or light wetsuits. Several of us got minor zaps on the face, but nothing serious or long-lasting. The water

varied between 81-84< F. Our main divemaster, Weke, had only been there twice. He was able to point out pygmy sea horses and hard-to-see critters, but we found many critters on our own. Given the unprecedented diversity in this area, that wasn't hard for us to do. We found two giant clams on this trip that had 52-foot shells. Grueling travel time to Sorong on the northwestern edge of New Guinea in the Papua Province of Indonesia. On the way there we had a day layover in Manado, Sulawesi, and four of us did several dives in Bunaken, one of Indonesia's Underwater National Parks. Others participated in various local tours. Layovers and side trips to various locations in Southeast Asia are relatively easy and inexpensive when flying Singapore Airlines. I teach Marine Biology at the university level and have been fortunate to dive on the world's best coral reefs including over 20 weeks in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Raja Ampat is unsurpassed for coral reef diversity. One live-aboard catering to European divers, the Pindito, has operated in the area for at least a decade, and a couple of other liveboards are moving into the area. We encountered the live-aboard Pelagian and less than a dozen other boats. Our captain, Rahmat, must have steered clear of villages because we saw none and rarely encountered any sign of civilization among the hundreds of islands. The reefs consisted of intact hard and soft corals along with storm-caused rubble and a minimal number of dynamited sites. diverse seascapes breed greater critter diversity and mixed coral and rubble provide this. Among the organisms that truly stood out on this trip were: 1) hard

and soft corals (alcyonaceans); 2) world-class flatworms; 3) crustaceans including mostly shrimps and crabs; 4) mollusks including lots of world-class nudibranchs plus giant clams and cephalopods; 5) echinoderms including starfishes, sea cucumbers and feather stars; 6) tunicates (ascidians or sea squirts) of all kinds and; 7) fishes of all varieties with lots of wobbegong sharks, pipefishes and scorpion fishes including lionfishes. There was an abundance of anemone/clownfish associations and cleaning stations, lots of sea snakes and beautiful, bountiful broccoli corals (alcyonaceans) and the most striking fish in the ocean, the juvi pinnate batfish. We saw five of them, and two were absolutely spectacular! We saw a few mantas, sharks, tunas and large barracuda, etc.; but as we discovered last year, this isn't an area with lots of large pelagics. Strong currents and relatively low visibility. The almost constant tidal currents are a pain for the photographer and a nuisance for the ordinary diver, being too strong to relax in and "go with the flow." visibility ranged from 30-60 feet. Skipper Rahmat and Divemaster Weke allowed us to deviate from our planned itinerary and go to Equator Island, where with our GPS units we determined exactly where the equator intersected a sheer rock wall on the east side. We geared up and were dropped off in the northern hemisphere and drifted along the bottom of the wall at 50 feet below the equator into the southern hemisphere. While everyone gave me a lot of flack about this request, they all enjoyed it, and I wouldn't be surprised if this new dive site were added to the regular itinerary!

**Komodo Dancer, September 2004, Curt Andrus (curt\_andrus@yahoo.com), Lewisville, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 74 to 80 F, calm, currents, no currents. Komodo Dancer crew was good. Attentive to diver's needs. Food was variable and plentiful. Briefings were held for every dive. DMs were in the water for every dive. Diving was from tenders that were easy to board and exit. We didn't spend enough time in southern Komodo. Stronger currents and cooler water promoted greater diversity. Northern Komodo biodiversity was good as well — plenty of small reef fish, hard and soft corals, nudis, ghost pipefish, pigmy seahorses, octopus and cuttlefish, Napoleon wrasses, bumphead parrots, and a number of sharks. Some dynamite fishing was audible underwater and some reef damage was evident, but it was not devastating. Ran aground on the last day. Had to be towed off the sandbar/reef by a tugboat from Bali. No injuries or loss of equipment and the crew handled the situation professionally. Got us off the boat and into hotel rooms for the last evening rather than staying onboard in port.

**Komodo Dancer, September 2004, Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to Feet. Water: 83 to F, calm, no currents. The Komodo Dancer was comfortable, the food was delicious with good variety, the crew was attentive and friendly, the weather pleasant, the water clear, the coral colorful, fish plentiful. Every dive was rewarding and productive with such trophies as pygmy seahorses, stargazers, blue ribbon eels, ornate ghost pipefish, and

nudibranchs. I did nearly every dive during the 10 days. My only complaint was my reluctance to end my dives at 60 minutes. That was a limit that seemed too tight. They have two tender boats and the dive sites were only a "stone's throw" from the Komodo Dancer boat. It is not even necessary to gather up all the divers at once. That is not how it is done on most other liveboards. Divers are picked up when they are ready. No problem. The excursion to Komodo Island is a nice feature. Seeing the dragons is a treat. Even better is seeing them in the wild on the other islands as they lumber around on the beach. We had the luck of rescuing a sea eagle that a fisherman had caught. We managed to get the fisherman to let us have the eagle that was in great need of water and food. After his release, he flew off to a tree surely grateful to be free. The final night's festivities included music, dancing, and limbo. The crew gets an A+ for entertainment. UW Photography Comments: Very adequate: good space on dive deck, rinse buckets, towels to dry and cover cameras, shelves, charging station inside.

**Komodo Dancer, October 2004, Bob and Gayle Bringas (robertbringas@email.msn.com), Gaston, OR.** Experience: 400 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 ft. Water: 73 to 81 F, choppy, strong currents. The deluxe room has minimal floor space due to the double bed. The bed was too high off the floor to sit on, so we had to get dressed standing up. No closet, only some deep, narrow shelves and three wall hooks. There was some under-bed storage, but it was not easy to get into because of the narrow floor space beside it. The two

deluxe rooms are in the bow, next to the chain locker. Not a good value. All diving, including night dives, is done from tenders. Boat drivers and crew members were efficient and attentive in helping you on/off the tender. Dive operation is well-run; they are knowledgeable about the currents and tides for timing the dives. There are 15 crew, plus three divemasters for 14 guests. Warm towels and snacks after every meal. A couple of the crew were masseurs, gave massages to guests for tips. Not lots of really big stuff, but lots of unusual stuff: frogfish, leaf fish, stonefish, scorpionfish, stargazers, banded sea snakes, blue ribbon eels, tiger cowrie, white-eyed eels. Lots of nudibranchs. The reefs are astounding, healthy and vibrant. The Yellow Wall (South Rinca Island) was the best dive of the 11-day trip, as well as the coldest (73 degrees). Bob got out the 2-mil wetsuit for this one, but Gayle dove it in dive skins and a Polartec. The visit to Komodo Island National Park is impressive and not to be missed. The hike was hot, but worth it to see Komodo dragons in the wild. We spent four weeks in Bali.

**Komodo Dancer, March 2005, Joe Mihm (j.mihm@att.net), Borger, TX.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 88 F, calm, currents, no currents. The crew was excellent! The food was good, some of it not my thing, but I was introduced to several new fruits. Accommodations were nice. Our room was quite large for a live aboard. Adequate closets and storage space. AC worked well! More than enough beverages and snacks. The entire reef was covered with life, few looked dead. No where to put a finger

to steady your self to take photos. We only saw one manta ray but he put on a show. Pigmy sea horses on many dives. Anemones and anemone fish where everywhere. Nudis on almost every dive. There were only significant currents on a few dives. Most dives were easy and relaxing. The current at Carnival Rock was unbelievable. I fought the current for a while and since I was also having problems with my camera I cut the dive short. The tender was there as I broke the surface. All diving was from two tenders. Six divers in ours and seven in the other. We had a DM on every dive. You could follow them or strike out on your own. The only time the diving seemed crowded was when the DMs were showing us the pigmy seahorses. Other than that we were on our own. The boat crew was also knowledgeable about the islands. The Dragons were cool! We also visited a couple of fishing villages ... very interesting. Pushy street vendors in Bali. Tourism is way down and the vendors will follow you into the cab to make a sale. UW Photography Comments: Large area for camera setup and drying. Lots of shelf space available for photo equipment too. Low pressure air and towels were available.

**Komodo Dancer, August 2005, Edith and John Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to Feet. Water: 80 F, calm. This was a return trip with my husband after a great solo trip on Komodo Dancer the previous September. I had high expectations. Many were met. Others were not. Some were due to chance like visibility and dive conditions. Comparing two trips is impossible because you never see the

same thing the same way. I did manage to accumulate an impressive collection of rather spectacular photos. One difficulty was the imposition of a 60-minute limit on dives especially after having more freedom to dive one's own capacity during our two immediately previous live-aboard trips in North Sulawesi. It is one thing to know that there is a certain quantity of gas in one's cylinder and to be able to choose how to manage it to control the dive time. And quite another to have an artificial limit placed on the dive. The preset time becomes a deadline that looms like a threat creating a sense of urgency and pressure that disturb the tranquility of the dive. It robs the diver of an element of discretion about shaping each underwater experience. At the end of a dive it can cut off a last minute opportunity to capture something special. That potential contributes to a state of anxiety. Every diver cannot magically exit the water in exactly 60 minutes, so the divemasters should not make a big issue about whether a diver ends the dive at 57 minutes or 64 minutes. The divemaster and tender should be there to serve and help the divers, not act like a drill sergeant issuing orders. You can be on the best boat in the best waters with the best marine life, but if the dive staff makes you feel uncomfortable and becomes overbearing, it is difficult to enjoy the trip. If the September trip had been like the August trip, there would have been no August trip for us. UW Photography Comments: Good charging station, adequate staging area for cameras and housings before diving. Towels for drying and covering housings and cameras.

**Mermaid I, September 2005, John M. Artim. (jartim@uistyle.com), Oakland, CA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 35 to 100 Feet. Water: 68 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Encrusting organisms in this part of Indonesia are stacked three and four deep on reefs. The effect is a giant swirl of color and motion. The fish life, particularly smaller (<3') fish, was more plentiful than anywhere I've been. The variety of the dives was spectacular including walls, patch reefs, sea mounts, and sand flats. The current was only up at one site — Lighthouse Reef — and this was the best chance to see white-tipped reef sharks and others cruising the blue. With stronger currents they get more pelagics. Dive entries were either giant strides from the Mermaid's dive platform or backrolls off one of two dinghies (RIBs) used as dive tenders. The dingy operators were really first class. When they spotted a surfaced diver they always checked for an OK sign. Kay Golding is an excellent dive master and tour guide. Unfortunately, she had a bad cold so she only went out on a couple dives. Her dive briefings were thorough and included a highly-detailed hand-drawn map of the site with key depths, indications of probable currents, and the intended dive profile. Kay concluded with a complete listing of the creatures of interest at the site. There was a strict no diving after alcohol policy. The Mermaid has an ample supply of oxygen onboard available for Nitrox (we typically did the second two dives of the day on Nitrox) and for first aid purposes. Kay warns everyone that conservative diving is a must considering the three to four dives-per-day for

six days. At the farthest point in our trip we would be 30 hours cruising time from the nearest hyperbaric chamber in Bali. Divers using Nitrox were required to measure their mix and sign off on a check-in sheet. Kay regularly reminded non-Nitrox divers that we might spend more time at depth than they could safely do. I broke a fin buckle. Kay lent me a spare strap until after the dive when I could go back to my cabin and retrieve my spare. My dive buddy's BC oral inflator valve stuck open. The staff spent an hour cleaning the valve and repairing the leak. Dust caps were routinely left off the regs after they cleaned up from one dive and set up for the next. We complained about this and Kay had words with the dive staff but the problem persisted. Otherwise, the dive crew went out of their way to make sure they did as much prep and clean up work as they could. We shared this trip with nine other divers. Six were from Germany, one was from Moscow, and the two were from California. They did not require us to stick with the dive guide. My buddy and I did split off on our own a couple of times because our group tended to bunch up and get in each-other's way. One diver paid no attention to whom she finned or flailed as she went for her photos. She monopolized photographic opportunities—even opportunities I had found for myself! Kay tried to address this in the dive briefings but the behavior persisted. The guide tried to mitigate this problem. Ironically, she apologized profusely after each dive—only to do it again on the next one! Our trip included land stops including to see the Komodo Dragons. The food and other

service are outstanding. The cook is Indonesian and we adored the Indonesian dishes she created including awesome fresh snapper. If you were a vegetarian or wanted American/Continental food you might not be as happy. They gave us an upgrade to the master cabin. It was positively spacious! Air conditioning was somewhat weak but air temperatures were high (about 80F) but we had an in-cabin fan. The shower/head/vanity area was roomy. The room had adequate storage space and the crew would stow luggage below-decks. Our room also had a DVD player and TV. We watched a couple movies before turning in. The dive deck included a separate dip tank for cameras, flashlights, and computers.

**Pelagian, 2004, Steven Levin, Arlington, VA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 35 to 80 Feet. Water: 72 to 82 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. I was on this boat for four (4) trips for a total of two (2) months. I started with their first trip of the year in late February 2004, did another trip from Sorong to Sorong in July, and concluded with a trip that went from Sorong to Bali via Kupang in September. Diving in Indonesia when covering diverse areas from Irian Jaya (now Papua) to Bali provides great opportunities for seeing areas with pristine corals, wonderful fish life, glorious invertebrates, and many macro opportunities. Areas such as Komodo, to include Rinca, offer beautiful soft corals with extensive fish and macro. There are locations that are "National Geographic" class. Gunung Api is a volcanic island that has hundreds to thousands of Sea Snakes. The boat is large and spacious for the

number of divers which is a maximum of twelve. Diving is done from two tenders with a dive guide and a maximum of six divers per tenders. Entry is a back roll and exit via a ladder. Nitrox is available and consistently filled to 32%. The lounge area is large and comfortable. There are many areas on the boat for sitting outside to read or lounge. There is typically three day dives and one dusk or night dive. On a few days subject to transit conditions there may be fewer dives. All dives are guided but you are free to dive solo. By most standards this boat is luxurious but it was showing wear and tear. The owner tells me they will do a major refit. Food was average. Salad at lunch but not dinner. Sliced fresh fruit only at lunch although there was a bowl of fresh fruit at other times. Cooked to order breakfast. Buffet at lunch and dinner with two choices for main courses. There was no cruise director as the captain attempted to fill this role. The diving staff and operation needs improvement. Dive briefings were minimal and uninformative. Dive guides varied in their "attentiveness." Some dive spots were damaged from dynamiting. With some capital investment and an improvement in diving operations this would rate as one of the best of boastful Photography Comments: There is a large dedicated area inside of the boat for photographers. The area contains many charging stations for 110 and 220. On the dive deck there are two large rinse tanks. Diving is from tenders and cameras are placed in the rear of the tenders. Care must be taken to not kick equipment.

**Pelagian, April 2005, Janet Czapski (info@divetravelservices.com),**

**Farmington Hills, MI.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, surge, currents. This area is touted as the bed of marine biodiversity. We enjoyed our diving in the Raja area but found it not up to the expectations. There were lots of fish but they were small; the large schools that we expected in strong currents did not appear. The hard/soft corals and sea fans were huge and showed no previous diver impact. Vis where wide angle shooting would have been preferred was pretty poor. Due to weather, we were confined to the more northern islands. The more southern areas are known for more prolific macro life so those seeking macro photo opportunities were disappointed, but we did see various nudibranchs, pipefish, mantis shrimp and other invertebrates. Pelagic sightings were pretty much nil. This group had done this boat before in Bali/Komodo and the impression was that the diving was tremendously better in that region than the Raja Ampat area. The boat has since been sold to Wakatobi for diving there. UW Photography Comments: Very large camera room for storage/lens changing. Large camera rinse tank on the back deck. Very little camera storage on the tenders but the crew's handling of cameras was excellent. Dual voltage plugs were available in the camera room. No facilities for digital users to view images or burn CD's or DVD's without bringing their own.

**Pelagian, September 2005, Ike (ikepharm@yahoo.com), West Linn, OR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 77 to 82 F, calm, currents. I did not expect pelagics and

except dog tooth tuna and barracuda, we did not get any. Some good mandarin fish sightings on a 2-day muck diving area. Most of the trip was drift dives on assorted walls, which appeared healthy and beautiful. The M/V Pelagian was on its fifth cruise in the Wakatobi area and needs a more dive site info. The ship is fantastic. It was large, clean, well run, with excellent galley and a great friendly staff. An overly enthusiastic photographer had two large cameras, one of which was free hanging, with strobes that acted as a wrecking ball on the coral. He constantly used the soft and hard coral to steady himself for "the shot," at one point wanting to move a beautiful black frogfish so he could have a better shot. Luckily, a divemaster stopped him. He was warned not to continue, but to no avail. Since this was his third trip to the Wakatobi area, I realize there was a cash flow issue, but gimme a break. UW Photography Comments: Separate room for photographers with plenty of outlets for recharging, dedicated rinse tanks and all photo equipment handled with kid gloves by staff.

**Sea Safari, September 2004, Rolla Cleaver (rleaver@cablespeed.com), South Beach, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 80 F., calm, currents, no currents. It was the first live-a-board trip for my son and I. I can't imagine it being much nicer. The boat was comfortable and the food was good, plentiful and with good variety. My son who is a vegetarian would have liked more creativity. Karl and Linda, who headed the trip were great. helpful spotting creatures and fun to be around. The quality

of the coral and the variety of small tropicals and strange creatures was beyond anything I would have imagined. There were a couple spots where currents were strong. More info during the briefings would have made things easier. The trip to Rinca to see the Komodo Dragons was great. We were able to go ashore on several islands when not diving and hike around. We saw a few sharks and barracuda, but the stars were the small critters and a wonderful group of Mantas at Manta Reef. Plenty of space and recharging facilities. Good instruction on board. Boat handlers did great job with cameras.

**Sea Safari III, September 2004, Daniel O. Benson (drb@danielOBensonMD.com), Klamath Falls, OR.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Calm, surge. The Sea Safari III is an older, wooden boat 115' long and 30' wide. It is stable and cruises at a leisurely seven knots, slow. It handles a maximum of 18 passengers. Rooms are adequate and clean. Late nights are quiet but other hours, slamming doors and loud voices are not easily overlooked. Food is family style and a variety of cuisine is served. Meals are usually on a windy deck. If your hair can't be tied back or isn't really short, bring a hat or scarf to keep the blowing hair out of your eyes. It will make or break your dining experience! The staff is fun, friendly, helpful and competent. This trip went from Bali to Flores. Dive sites are on both the North and South side of the Indonesian Archipelago. Water on the south side of the Indonesian Archipelago is 70-73. Currents bring deep, nutrient rich, cold water to the surface. There is more plankton,

which limits visibility. Of course, these same currents nourish the astounding array of marine life that there is to see. The north side of the Archipelago is much warmer, 83 degrees. I dove in a 3-4-5 mm suit the entire trip but a heavier suit would have been nice (my wife used a 7 mm in the colder water and was happy as an Indonesian clam)! A hood is helpful for warmth and to prevent ear infections from plankton. Currents are unpredictable, and may rip at times. Hooks are optional. It is a good idea to know how to use your safety sausage although tender boat captains keep close tabs on divers. Consider doing some river diving to get prepared for the strong currents! Diving is done off small tenders. You do a back roll entry, trying not to hit your head on the diver next to you! Then climb a ladder on the side of the tender to get back. Komodo National Park has a prehistoric feel. Yes, these animals are wild and charge people. Do not separate from the group. From experience, I will tell you that running incites their prey instinct! Be wary about shopping in Bali. Prices for the sucker tourists are greatly inflated. We had a taxi driver take us to the "best quality" places. After about the second shop we caught on that these were the shops with the best commission for him! UW Photography Comments: Outstanding with ample room for camera set up. Limited 110 v access to recharge strobe batteries, computers, etc.

**Sea Safari III, April 2005, William Deertz ([wdeertz@centrin.net.id](mailto:wdeertz@centrin.net.id)), Jakarta, Kuningan.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F., calm, no currents. My second trip

on the Sea Safari III. The ship has been well maintained and most of the crew were the same. We missed one full day of diving (I don't count the muck diving which was offered in Sorong as this was mediocre at best) due to a group of 6 divers joining that missed their flight. We spent the first day in Sorong waiting for this group to arrive on the next days flight. Several in the trip complained of the delay. No compensation was offered for the missed day of diving (also the Nitrox fee was not discounted from the 11 day rate). It's unacceptable to cause the other 9 divers onboard to miss diving due to another group being delayed. It would have been preferable for the ship to leave for the first dive destination and the delayed group catch up, using alternative travel arrangements (i.e., via a speed boat at their own expense). I wonder if they would have delayed the trip if only one person was late. Food was excellent, pre-morning dive consisted of continental breakfast, after the morning dive full break to order was available. After the first couple of days lunches were various creations from the previous nights dinner, but were creatively done. Every night was a different theme (Japanese, Indian, Indonesian, Greek, Italian, BBQ, etc) Afternoon snacks were weak, consisted of popcorn, peanuts, fried bananas, etc. Excuses were this was a remote area and unable to devote more kitchen space/time for the afternoon snacks. The previous expatriate dive guides/cruise directors (Karl/Linda) were completing their final trips. Their replacements (Robertus/Ogla) were still learning the operations but were good. They were complimented by two

local dive guides (Seno/Agus). All dive guides were experienced and helpful in pointing out critters. Some dive sites it didn't appear they knew well. I guess this can be chalked up to this being partially exploratory diving. The reefs were pristine (very nice wall diving) and in good condition. The southern dive sites didn't have as many critters and the visibility was generally poorer compared to the more northern sites we went to. Other than 1 or 2 sites not as many pelagics as I expected considering the remoteness. Overall I was pleased.. Ample space for charging batteries, also ample space for setting up cameras. The crew did an excellent job of loading your equipment on the boat and rinsing after the dives.

**Sea Safari III, June 2005, David Shem-Tov, (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 6 to 40 Meters. Water: 24 to 30 Celsius, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. "Only on the Kararu!" crowed Tony Rhodes whenever the exceptional happened, was sighted, or experienced. And there was plenty on this trip. Tony is one of the three directors of Kararu Dive Voyages. Energetic and enthusiastic, Tony infected all of us — his excellent crew and the full boatload of passengers — with his passion for some of the best coral and critter diving on this planet. Full trip, sponsored by Bret Gilliam's Fathoms magazine, but one could always find a place to be alone — important on an 11 night trip. Generous outdoor space, which is much more enjoyable to dine and lounge in than the salon. (We were moored next to the Pindito and the Komodo Dancer

during this trip — both considerably smaller lacking a lot of the outdoor space of our boat.) The dive guides, cruise directors and boat crew are superb. The food was varied, plentiful and of high quality. Power outlets 110v-220v. Crew handled cameras well. Lens recommendations were given prior to every dive.

**Sea Safari III, June 2005, Mark Cortright, Arcata, CA.** Experience: 1300 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 feet. Water: 83 to 85 F. This was a fabulous trip. We booked the whole thing — two back-to-back trips — New Guinea to Bali. This boat was overbooked — too many divers — max for boat is 16 — we had 19. The owner, Kararu Dive Voyages, was aboard and was super. Brett Gilliam and his wife were along. The trip was great except too many divers. The boat was OK but needs some work. Camera table set-up was the worst I've seen. Three of the four divemasters were super — one should have stayed home. Made 80 dives and the critter/muck diving was the best. This boat should only have 16 divers aboard!

**Sea Safari III, August 2005, Bill Lord Butcher (bill@butcherandbutcher.com), Sacramento, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 Feet. Water: 23 to 32 Celsius, calm, currents. Described as perhaps the best diving in the world in Undercurrent a couple of years ago, and it may have been then, this was a major disappointment. The dive planning was dreadful, with fixed times for an area with heavy currents — meaning that instead of planning the dives to the times when dive sites should be visited, they were 7:30 A.M.,

10:30 A.M., 2:30 P.M. and 6 P.M. despite when the sites were at their best or, sometimes, even diveable. One dive was near life-threatening in current, my buddy and I aborted that one and three others as just being miserable. The sites when the conditions happened to meet the fixed dive times, ranged from poor to good, but never great. The boat was in poor condition, with heads and water pipes breaking in staterooms and elsewhere, including the engine, which needed parts and tools flown in and caused a day long wait. Perhaps the worst was anchoring in a raging current with three large rocks directly behind the boat in the middle of a wide channel. Had the anchor failed the boat would still be on those rocks. And the anchor did fail the next day, where losing the anchor was safe. The food was near tasteless. My wife went to the galley to cook something tasty for two meals (and the galley staff welcomed her). However, she said it was dirty and she was uncomfortable cooking in it. At least one passenger reported being ill from what she was certain was spoiled food. No fruit, snacks, other than coffee and tea available 24/7. Lindsay, the divemaster, and his wife were nice but seemed inexperienced and locked either into a company policy on dive times and sites or in over their heads. Three day dives were the limit, which is enough for me but four could have easily been planned. Never were we anywhere near decompression limits on our computers. The one good thing was the experienced and lovely people who shared the trip, the best group with whom I have ever shared a trip. This well educated and experienced group

articulated their gripes in creative and colorful words and stories!

**Sea Safari III, August 2005, Stephen Peters, Ketchikan, AL.** The boat is roomy, food was generally adequate, the captain seemed skilled and the Indonesian crew polite. Though the Indonesian archipelago is of tremendous beauty from Bali to Komodo Island, and offers great bio-diversity and healthy underwater sites, the value of the voyage was diminished by: lack of maintenance including slow progress and subsequent missed dives the first two days, a breakdown of the power plant and a subsequent day and a half delay (waiting for an airplane/boat delivery of replacement parts and tools), loss of the main anchor while anchored; constant difficult dive exits to tenders with limited assistance by staff; several misplaced entries to sites with strong currents that essentially meant several aborted dives. Though mola were sited on two dives, mantas, and egg-laying cuttlefish also, night dives invariably were to "beach" sites, shallow and often lacking in life — instead of nearby walls! Sails on the boat were never raised as promised, and a beach trip for shelling was cancelled. The meal and dive schedule allowed a maximum of three day dives + a night dive. Nitrox was \$10/fill or \$200 for the trip. The craft is noisy from the engine, generators, and wood construction that creaked so loudly at night sleep was virtually impossible in the lower deck cabins. An upper deck cabin (offered to a guest at an additional \$100 per night had no functioning shower) Hot water for showers was sparse on the dive deck,

the whole toilet system was subject to flooding all bathrooms! Traveling from Alaska, British Air lost my luggage including all dive gear (except hand-carried regulator) in London due to a wildcat strike. Informing the Kararu office by email from the Singapore airport en route to Bali, I requested that gear in my size be available onboard due to the luggage loss. While the airline had my voyage itinerary, it would not be possible to rendezvous with my luggage even if it arrived in Bali. The company charged me full rental for this gear, despite no cost for distressed divers with luggage delays on Bilikiki, Walindi Plantation, and Bali International Diving Professionals at Nusa Lembongan Resort, where we dove following the Kararu cruise. There I was not only provided full dive gear at no cost, but was greeted by a welcoming phone call at the resort to confirm gear and sizes needed. I did not see my luggage and gear until my return to Alaska, rendering the trip a loss for photography.

**Serenade, December 2004, David Haupt (dbh@myunderwaterworld.com), Louisville, KY.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. We were met at the airport by reps. of Murex and loaded into 2 minivans. I am a fairly aggressive driver (although I am mellowing in my old age) and I was literally scared stiff. Two lane roads are really three lanes here because a lot of drivers pass in the center — even if there are on-coming vehicles!! Why there is not a wreck every 15 minutes is beyond me!! We were unloaded at the resort, given a welcome drink, fed supper, filled out

the mandatory paperwork and loaded onto the boat. The Serenade is old; has no ice, only cold water and the rooms are small and dank. However, the rooms are air conditioned (after supper — until morning), and the beds are decent. Nitrox is advertised but there is no fill station on-board. If you desire Nitrox, they shuttle it from one of their 3 resorts to the boat. No one dove it on this trip. The food was quite tasty and plentiful! Breakfast included such things as pancakes, rice with vegetables and meat and eggs. Lunch and supper usually included one fish dish and one chicken dish, rice, vegetables, potatoes and awesome soups. One entrée per meal had a little zing (spicy) to it. Dessert alternated between pineapple, watermelon and mango. \$1,470 for 8 days of diving is a steal, but you have to want to dive and don't mind rustic conditions. Couple this with \$1,300 airfare and it is a bargain for sure. With 13 of us on -board, and 11 with cameras, it really never felt any more crowded than any other live -aboard I have been on. 12 of the divers were experienced divers with previous live -aboard experience, so the etiquette required for such conditions was inherent. The crew was extremely helpful and friendly and the guides were awesome! Entry was by either a giant stride off the back of the boat or a backroll from one of the Zodiacs. Most of the time we were picked up by the Zodiacs. Most of the surfaces are painted metal and slick once they are even slightly wet. We had 3 falls during our trip and I broke my little toe in one of the mishaps! A little sand mixed in with the paint would help. The boat headed to Bangka while

we slept. We woke up the next morning; ate cake, bananas and drank some coffee. A dive briefing was given, we suited up and hit the water. I have never seen color like this! Soft corals, hard corals ... and more different fish than I have ever seen on one dive site. We spent 2 days at Bangka then slipped off to Lembeh in the night. 5 dive days in Lembeh with the same routine: cake, bananas, coffee and tea followed by a 7:00 AM dive. Eat breakfast after the first dive, dive again! Spend your next SI eating lunch, then dive again. The night dive commenced around 6:30 PM followed by supper. All totaled, 4 dives per day were offered including the night dive. After the 5 days in Lembeh, we steamed back to Bangka for the final 1 days of diving. The diving in Bangka is slopes covered in healthy soft and hard corals with a plethora of multi-colored fish, shrimp, crabs, shrimp and nudibranchs. The diving in Lembeh was the legendary muck diving. We saw 3 different colors of seahorses (in ONE dive), 3 different colors of pygmy seahorses, star gazer (I missed that one), octopi, 2 wonderpi (?), various shrimps, various crabs and more frogfish and nudis than I can remember (it's hell getting old). Every briefing in Lembeh was the same; sandy slope with a maximum depth of 30 meters — frogfish, pygmy seahorses and maybe a ghost pipefish! One day we opted to do an evening land tour to see the monkeys. We lathered up with DEET and rode the Zodiacs to shore. The guide led us through the jungle and would stop ever so often, listen, and say 100 more meters. After hearing this about 6 times, we finally find where

they were in the treetops. The guide informed us that they would not sleep in these trees. They prefer to bed down in much larger trees and if we waited, they would come down. We waited and waited. Then as if on cue, they all (30-50) quickly scaled down the trees and ran off. So many of them plopped down it was as if it were "raining" monkeys! It was well worth the hike and wait. Once the 8 days of diving were completed, we were dropped off at a new resort named Kima Bajo Resort and Spa. This Resort was not "officially" open yet but has entertained some guests. One of the organizer's of our trip is friends with the owner and made the arrangements. The on-site dive operator is Odyssey Divers. They have 3 nice dive boats, new Scubapro rental gear and an awesome camera room with lockable storage. It is a short boat ride to Bunaken from here. A couple from our group dove with them and said Bunaken was awesome. Between my broken toe and flooded strobe (last boat dive, last day), I elected to chill out. UW Photography Comments: No dedicated camera table. Decent rinse tanks. Electricity for charging was adequate.

**Serenade, August 2005, Edith and John Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to Feet. Water: 82 to F, calm. We went from the Ocean Rover to the Serenade that was like moving from the Queen Mary to the African Queen. We almost expected to see Humphrey Bogart appear. Serenade had all of the color and atmosphere of another century. It was a step back in time, and though the boat was built in the 90s,

it seemed like it must have been in the 40s. The cabins were air conditioned and fortunately they allowed us to keep ours on all day, but no so for all the guests. The others were mostly Australians or British who did not mind the heat. We appreciated a cool retreat though we were right over a vibrating and loud engine that shook us to sleep. Our request for Nitrox had not been communicated from our agent to the boat. It turned out not to be a problem. We managed to eek out hour dives and with personal attention from the lower ratio of guide-to-guest on this smaller boat, we saw more unique creatures than we had on the Ocean Rover. After all, Murex Dive had been the pioneer of diving in the North Sulawesi region and knew the best places to dive. In fact, Ocean Rover staff had traveled on Serenade to learn where to go! This boat was the genuine Indonesian operation and quality was not competitive with the "resort" standard set by Ocean Rover. This boat did not have the luxurious lounge, electronic equipment, photo facilities, or even much room on the dive deck. It made up for those deficiencies in flexibility. The tables used for dining were available for everything including my computer, the camera, housing, or whatever needed attention anytime other than meal time. Though we covered the same areas of North Sulawesi, we dove on different sites. They did not design this boat with photographers in mind, but the crew tried to accommodate our needs and were helpful in all respects. In spite of the lack of first class facilities, we were comfortable because they had a good attitude.

## MALDIVES

**Manthiri, March 2004, Michael W. McCroskey (mmccroskey@houston.rr.com), League City, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. The boat set-up is great and the service is better. Nitrox compressor went out during our trip while far from Male, so Nitrox was not available. Other than that the boat (both Manthiri and dive boat) were extremely well conceived and well implemented. The crew to passenger ratio was always over 1:1, they were attentive, friendly, and well trained. The shore trips were few, but for most divers, about right. It's a long way to go from the States, so we were the only Americans on the boat although it was laid out for and seemed to cater to Americans (judging by the electrical service, food, and facilities). UW Photography Comments: plenty of 110v a/c with flat prong plugs in camera area. Good rinse tank for cameras. Monitor available.

**Manthiri, April 2005, David Shem-Tov (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Meters. Water: 29 to 30 Celsius, calm, choppy, surge, currents. In five and a half diving days, divemaster Manik delivered two whale shark encounters, three amazing dancing manta ray shows, squadrons of dolphins and eagle rays, even distant sightings of five hammerheads. The cabins were spacious and clean. Always plenty of hot or cold water. We were invited to have our clothes cleaned (for free.) Service