

in the open-air dining/bar area over the water. Most food was Chinese and Malaysian/Indonesian, which was delicious. There were some western foods. Topside activities — volleyball, kayaking, snorkeling. We spent our surface intervals walking around the island (that took an hour), crossing over to the smaller adjacent islet at low tide, lolling on the deck, and getting massages. There's nice coral in front of the resort, starting at 15 feet and sloping down to 60 feet and deeper. Mostly coral heads, and it gets sparse below 60 feet, so we confined our diving to the shallower depths. Small tropicals and macro creatures were abundant on these shore dives. Morays, octopus, crocodile fish, unicorn fish, leaf fish, plus all the other typical Pacific types. You had to take the boat to see turtles and rays. We never saw sharks. Matak-ing Island is across the channel from Sipadan, so it has many of the same types of sea life. Currents could get strong and might change midway through the dive, making it impossible to return to the entry point. On our shore dives, the resort always posted a boat to keep watch for us in case we needed to get picked up. There were three boat dives a day — 8:30, 10:30, and 2pm — which left promptly and took divers' requests. (Reef Resort will take divers on a 3-dive day trip to Sipadan). I wouldn't classify the diving as superb, although maybe that was due to the time of year, but it was certainly acceptable. I've been diving for over 15 years while my husband was only certified a week before we went to Malaysia. The dive shop was terrific, with plenty of space to leave our gear overnight and between dives,

plenty of filled tanks all day and night, plenty of showers and snacks, a full line of rental gear. The rinse tanks were limited and rarely cleaned. However, they were installing several more tanks and when we complained about the dirty water, they cleaned the tanks and refilled them. It's a wonderful spot for people who want to get away from it all, especially couples looking for a romantic hideaway. And I think the diving is good enough for experienced divers to be satisfied, especially given the nice shore diving which allows for plenty of bottom time even when the boats aren't going out. A nice add-on for those who have time: stay in a jungle camp on the Kinabatangan River and search out pygmy elephants, river crocodiles, and orangutans, then climb to the top of Mount Kinabalu. (Website: www.mataking.com).

MALDIVE ISLANDS

These 7000 low-lying coral islands in a 1200-mile chain southeast of India will be among the first to disappear when global warming raises sea levels significantly. The reefs have suffered coral bleaching, but liveaboards still find exciting fish life. Many of the 200 inhabited islands have classy resorts catering to Europeans, with good to excellent diving.

Bandos Island

Bandos Island Resort, December 2004, Donna, Dhahran, EP. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 82 to 88 F., currents. Wonderful resort.

Hotel staff is excellent! The staff at the restaurants remembers your personal likes/dislikes. The Dive Masters and all other staff were extremely helpful and competent. They were able to help us with small repair. The island was basically empty as many tourists cancelled their trips. The island did not suffer any damage. The viz was quite a bit less than we anticipated. The locals said it was probably due to the tsunami and impending storm season. We saw "squadrons" of mantas. We were in 12' of water, and they virtually "flew" right over us. Amazing. There is lots of new coral growth which is good to see since El Nino. I lost my camera at sea. There were no facilities on the boats, as we were only out for a maximum of 3 hours at a time. There was a fresh water rinse area in the locker area when we returned to shore.

RED SEA (EGYPT)

Hurghada dive operators are failing to care for their reefs, so divers — mainly European — are heading farther south. Live-aboards are the way to get to the best diving. Water temperatures can drop into the cool 60s during February and rise to the 80s by August. Many divers combine a Red Sea trip with a visit to Israel and historical biblical sites.

Lucky Divers, June 2005, Roberta Levin (roberta@reddog.net), Boulder, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25- to 75 Feet. Water: 76-78 to F. Getting to Sharm from Israel wasn't easy, no direct flights, so we flew to Eilat and drove

three hours. Lots of hotels offering all classes of accommodations. Stayed at the Hyatt that was not walking distance to Naama Bay, but did have good shore diving and a water park. Lucky Divers were terrific with us and our two inexperienced 13-year-old divers. Lucky Divers gave us the same guide for just the four of us for two days without asking. We spent all day on the boat as they are slow, but Ras Mohammed corals are spectacular, healthy and colorful. Lots of tropical fish, little to moderate currents. We were restricted to 60 feet with the kids and didn't feel we were missing much except maybe a dive to see lots of hammerhead sharks! Sharm in the summer is hot, very hot. It's a big resort area with a couple of casinos, but not much in the way of culture. The ATV ride into the desert was lots of fun.

THAILAND

Of course the tsunami had a disastrous effect on many of Thailand's reefs, but live-aboards visit the areas that remained intact and excellent. From Phuket, day boats make trips into the Andaman Sea to Richelieu Rock where fish life can be exciting. Many live-aboards visit as well and good ones extend their trips to more distant areas, including the Burma Banks in Myanmar. Thailand has unending opportunities for broader travel experiences so take extra time to appreciate the culture.

Koh Tao, January 2005, Jim Pryde, Mendocino, CA. We were scheduled to spend two weeks on Koh Tao, in the Gulf of Thailand, but after the Tsu-