

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

was generally good. Mineral water and occasional juices were free. Sodas \$2, beers \$3, mediocre wine and spirits were also available. Nitrox, offered at \$10 a fill, never appeared on our bills. Air divers were offered the choice of 12L or 15L bottles — to make for longer dive times. Everything was consistent with the \$1500 price tag — low by standards of live-aboards targeting the US market. Yet four of the ten passengers on the boat declined the invitation to leave a tip and felt they needed to justify their actions to others. They had some gripes. The 11-year-old wooden boat was showing its age, with public areas “decorated like my grandma’s living room,” according to one passenger. Air conditioning was fine in the cabins but marginal in the salon. The public areas of the boat were untidy with junk strewn about everywhere and unsavory ashtrays just outside the galley where the staff huddled for regular smokes. The food was sometimes good but often repetitive: fried chicken and fried fish on just every lunch and dinner. Snacks were poor: unsavory biscuits and little fruit. The lengthy 3-4 hour ocean crossings should have occurred at night and not eat into our dive days. In total only 18 dives were offered over 5.5 days, 2 on the first day, 4 on another, 3 each on the rest. Divemaster Manik, the only one on board for 10 divers, was sometimes vague about the day’s plans, though I think he needed the flexibility. He often demanded our presence in the hot salon while he drew the dive map for the next dive site. (His lengthy, repetitive briefings — often describing several possible

scenarios for the dive as dictated by emerging conditions — would only be delivered after he finished drawing, 20 minutes or so later.) He clearly irked some divers when lecturing them on their profiles, inattention to his briefings, or inability to descend quickly enough. Yet, to my mind, he was too tolerant of one particularly bad diver who would constantly and mercilessly grab on live coral to steady herself and displayed a pathological need to stroke, lift and drop every aquatic creature she encountered. [She was bitten by a moray once. Sadly she was wearing gloves.] Manik was also overly sensitive to some clients, whom he felt may have slighted him. Yet I couldn’t help but like him. He made genuine efforts to please and delivered really good dives, often securing great camera positions for me and accommodating my request to dive the Maldivian Victory Wreck. The diving was good, although there could be more of it, the live-aboard just adequate. I would be willing to pay more for greater luxury and a more refined service. The *Manthiri* is reputed to be at the top of the local league with the exception of the \$800 a day *Four Seasons Explorer* which offers limited diving. There is room in the market for something in between — and targeted at divers. I was pleased to make the acquaintance on board of another Undercurrent subscriber, Clayton N. Taylor, a true gentleman. His good humor greatly added to my enjoyment of the trip. Live-aboard operators everywhere would do well to extend Mr. Taylor free invitations for the benefit of their paying guests. UW Photography

Comments: Small dedicated camera rinse tank on separate dive dhoni was sometimes used for other purposes. Camera table and 220v+110v electrical hookups on mother boat. Staff handled cameras correctly.

Manthiri, April 2005, William Hoff, Parlin, NJ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, currents. Trip was fabulous. Singapore Airlines is the best. The people at Sea n See and Livewell Ventures did everything right. The crew of the Manthiri was wonderful and catered to your every need. Our dive guides, Mosa and Manik, are enthusiastic about sharing their water world and gave complete dive briefings before every dive. Marine life was mind boggling. Healthy coral both soft and hard of every description.

Sultan of Maldives, February 2005, Flavio De Simone, Stamford, CT. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, currents. The trip was organized just after the tsunami. While there was some damage to the large hard coral tables in some channels, overall the reef condition was great. I was concerned about coral bleaching, but thanks to the southern position of the atoll, there was little damage. Quality of hard coral was great. Tropical fish life very good, including turtles, zebra sharks, eagle rays and large school of gray reef sharks. Diving is in channels (called thilas) typically with medium to strong current flowing into the atoll. Boat is elegant, service was great. Diving was always from dohni (small boat attached), with no need to carry diving equipment.

RED SEA

M/V Tala, Red Sea Explorers, August 2005/08, Delia Milliron (delia@gue.com), Menlo Park, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 200 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F. I organized this trip for myself (instructor and tech diver) and my family (not as experienced, recreational divers) on the new M/V Tala, operated by Red Sea Explorers (www.redseaexplorers.com). The boat and crew were fabulous and everyone can do spectacular diving within their safe comfort level. Red Sea Explorers has a land base at Deep South with eco style lodging and easy access to the excellent house reef and many sites we visited on the Tala for day boat diving. The rooms looked nice, and the accommodations on the Tala were also excellent. The upper deck is a spacious shady area for enjoying the breeze, and a classroom/TV room stocked with DVDs. The dining room was my favorite place, with the excellent, veggie-friendly food. Starting from Tondoba, south of Marsa Alam, the Tala has easy access to the Red Sea's best diving. For the first dive, we jumped in at the house reef for a mellow shake out dive. But this was no throw away dive! First thing I saw was a lionfish, then rays, toadfish, soft corals, hard corals all in 20-30 feet of water. The operation by the RSE team is smooth. They blend Nitrox at no extra charge so you've always got the right gas without a hassle. There is a zodiac on board they drop you in the perfect spot — often it's a one way trip back to the Tala, sometimes the zode picks you up at the other end. When there