

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

was a tech dive really worth seeing, RSE owner, Faisal, dove with me and had all that I needed (doubles, stages, extra regs, helium, scooters) on board. Otherwise, I dove with my family just using a set of doubles with 32% Nitrox or oxygen enriched Trimix. My sister-in-law got to try out a set of jetfins with spring straps, my husband got to try a canister light and do a couple of scooter dives. I have never seen such healthy reefs and they usually come within a few feet of the surface, so you get to see corals, lion fish, clownfish all the way to the surface. One highlight was a recently wrecked live-aboard lying at around 285ft. We took the scooters (of course) and ran along a spectacular wall of sea fans and corals down to the ship. As a new wreck, it's intact with all kinds of fun places to scooter through and around (no drinks available at the bar, however). Working our way back up the slope, Faisal brought me to a large cavern whose entrance spans 130' to 160' deep, and it is almost as wide. It was large inside, bending around a corner before closing down. We continued scooting around the walls all the way through deco. It was like four dives in one — just awesome! The next morning we were at the Elphin-stone, an impressive, slightly crescent shaped pinnacle that comes up to a few feet deep in the middle, with sloping plateaus around 80-110 ft on each end (north and south). From there, it drops off with the next shoulder being around 200' deep, then dropping again into the blue. The boat was moored near the South plateau below which sits a tremendous arch. The base was at 200' and the top maybe 130'. Faisal

and I headed for the arch straight away and scooted through and around it a few times including a fun little swim through between the boulders piled inside. We ran along the West wall passing 6 foot diameter sea fans, giant fish and even a hammerhead shark all the way to the North end where a second, much lower archway sits below the northern plateau. Deco took us around the plateau then for a mellow drift along the reef wall. We stayed for three dives here before moving on. The last one was more than an hour at 60 ft max, but no less amazing! The crew was really good, healthy food always with excellent veggie options, clean comfortable accommodations and a great place to watch movies. UW Photography Comments: Specially set up charging stations for strobe batteries, TV room/class room for reviewing the day's shots, accommodating about getting cameras in and out of the water.

Pegasus, November 2004, Kent Backman (kent@kentbackman.com), Gig Harbor, WA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Meters. Water: 29 to 30 Celsius, calm. Due to the political situation in the Middle East, the Red Sea of Sudan probably has fewer American divers than any tropical dive destination on the planet. We did not see or hear of any other Americans. The live-aboard Pegasus is owned by Emperor Divers, a UK-based Red Sea diving operation who has all but one of their boats in the Red Sea of Egypt. The M/Y Pegasus was a organized, professional operation. The few other European-owned live-aboard operations in Sudan did not seem so well polished. The Dutch and German divemaster

couple was “rotating” this season in Sudan from their normal positions in Hurghada, Egypt. So about the diving. Very good. There were several reefs on several days where we encountered schools of 20-50 hammerhead sharks. Most dives had one or more grey reef sharks. This operation was against shark feeding, but others may not be. Nonetheless, a unique shark lure of a half-filled bottle of water taken down and shaken by the Dutch divemaster ensured that we would have close grey shark encounters. Great for photographers. Most dives were along steep walls, with healthy coral, large schools of jacks and reef fish, and excellent wrecks. Visibility near the surface during our week trip was only mediocre due to the prevailing wind, but once below 20 meters, it was nearly unlimited. It was reported that best time for sharks is fall through spring. Nitrox and rather large 15-liter (95 cubic feet) steel cylinders allowed us to exceed 75 minutes on many of my dives. Generally, the stronger the current, the more sharks. Highly recommend reel and large safety sausage, even though the tender operators were good, and extra computer batteries as there are no sources to obtain batteries in Port Sudan. The dive facility and boat in Sudan do not have computers for rent. Sudan is a great way to escape the crowds of the more northern Red Sea areas. Make sure you are adequately insured for any camera equipment you bring. Heard a discussion that this may be the last live-aboard season for Emperor Divers in Sudan, though they say they may maintain their shore-based boat. Apparently this day-boat operation (and

the Hilton Port Sudan) is immensely popular with visiting Chinese businessmen. Minimal rinse bucket for cameras, but no power strips or work desks for equipment set up. Sudan is a poor country. My entire video housing and light setup in its Pelican case was stolen after it was checked in as luggage for my return flight to Cairo from Port Sudan. I suspect it never left Port Sudan, though would not rule out being stolen by Cairo airport employees either. Several weeks later I have not received any compensation from Sudan Airways. My credit card company is still attempting to get information from Sudan Airways.

THAILAND

Mermaid I, March 2005, Michael W. Igoe (mike_igoe@estreet.com), Aurora, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F., calm, currents. Faultless live-aboard arrangements were made by Siam Dive & Sail (John Williams), Phuket. Excellent crew/diver ratio. Usually 3-4 divers with divemaster or leader. Dive staff was superb. Good critter finders. About the only thing that you did on your own was to put on your wetsuit. Pre-dive briefings were short and to the point. Never a doubt as to where you were, where you were going, and what you might see. Remainder of the crew was equally personable and helpful. Absolutely no prompting or hinting or gratuities, which they roundly deserved. Boat was well run.

MY Anggun, March 2005, Michael W. McCroskey (mmccroskey@houston.rr.com), League City, TX. Experience: