

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-

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