

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:

501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 78 to 85 F., calm, choppy. Loved the Anggun and the crew. The trip was twelve days without a repeat of dive sites except when requested. Diving was not particularly difficult. Service was excellent, food was good to excellent (and plentiful), weather was great. Tsunami was absolutely not a factor in any way. Some cold currents for several minutes during some dives. Take at least a 3 mil suit. A one night stay in Phuket after the trip would have been a good idea rather than waiting around to fly. Camera area on dive deck was crowded. Limited charging except for stateroom.

Ocean Rover, January 2005, Robert and Ruth Lindner (Ruthbob@aol.com), New York, NY. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F., calm. The diving was wonderful — pelagics, large and small fish, schools of fish, coral, nudibranchs, crabs, lobsters, seahorses, morays. One dive had two morays in every hole in the reef. No hassles or restrictions diving (except no diving after drinking). Divemasters and crew are fantastic. They actually help you on and off with your wetsuit and have now spoiled us for future diving. The best live-aboard we have ever been on (we've been diving for over 20 years). We saw no adverse effects from the tsunami — this was the first cruise after the event. We also went to Angkor Wat and spent a few days in Bangkok — made all the reservations and arrangements ourselves on the Internet and all worked out perfectly. Long trip — I would stop somewhere in the middle next time.

Ocean Rover, February 2005, Scott Sansenbach (scott.sansenbach@verizon.net), Huntington Beach, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F., calm. Boat and crew were fantastic. Boat may be best designed in the world! Not beautiful but functional and comfortable. Great facilities for photographers, comfortable and spacious cabins with roomy en suite bathrooms. Abundant fresh water supply due to water maker system. A/C works, comfortable beds. Salon and dining area are comfortable. Upstairs lounging and dining area spacious and comfortable. Diving deck and whale deck well designed and comfortable. Outdoor camera tables (three!) with two stage rinse tanks and separate buckets for rinsing masks and gear. Good 3000psi fills with 32% Nitrox available. Inflatable tenders actually have a usable dive ladder and are well maintained. High level of service from Thai crew and knowledgeable divemasters (Mick and Hans) were great at finding critters and knowledgeable in their identification and natural history and enthusiastic helping guests enjoy the dives. Briefings were accurate. The crew was always anticipating your needs. Weather was perfect. We hardly rocked at all, no rain, no rough weather. Dives were great for critters (ornate ghost pipefish, frogfish, pineapple fish, seahorses, nudibranchs, etc.) and we had a surprising number of manta encounters in both Burma (Black Rock), and Thailand (Surin Islands, Ko Bon). No whale sharks. Good schooling fish and small pelagics at Richelieu rock. Large sharks are severely depleted in Burma and Thailand although leopard

sharks were common. Burma Banks is no longer a shark encounter destination (they are all soup). A few baby silvertips and reef sharks were seen. No large pelagic sharks. Tsunami damage was visible in Surin Islands and Similans. Mostly broken staghorn coral with and a few large coral heads that had broken loose and tumbled down the reef slope. None in Burma that we saw. Net damage to reefs, over fishing, and dynamite fishing are threats to reefs (especially in Burma). Phuket resort area and Patong Beach are up and running. You can see rebuilding and reconstruction and most businesses are open. Bars and nightclubs are busy but below their usual insane pace. Kata Thani Resort was beautiful! Beaches were clean and nice and locals were happy that tourists are starting to return. UW Photography Comments: Large charging, slash setup area in salon with abundant storage below. 110 and 220 available and boat had a good selection of power strips and adapters. Outdoor camera tables for staging cameras before dives, two stage rinse tanks for cameras only. Separate rinse buckets for dive gear and fresh water hoses.

Ocean Rover, February 2005, Mark & Diana Woodward (dhwmjw@comcast.net), Bellingham, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F., calm, surge. We booked this trip after the December 26 tsunami. Most of the island was unaffected and in 34 dives from the live-aboard operation I saw no evidence of tsunami damage to reefs. The Ocean Rover is the best of the 8 live-aboards I have experienced. Spotless boat, top notch service (12 crew for max of 16 guests), a spa-

acious cabins and en suite head/shower and effective in-cabin controlled air conditioning. Food was a so-so offering of western food and a rather bland and monotonous form of Thai food. Diving was great — many mantas, some leopard sharks, silvertip sharks, stingrays, potato cod, lots of cuttlefish, lionfish everywhere, seahorses, ghost pipefish, seahorses, harlequin shrimp, etc. etc. Most diving was from dinghy in some current. Excellent dinghy ladder system made re-boarding the dinghy easy. UW Photography Comments: Spacious camera and charging facilities both on dive deck and indoors. Plenty of 110 and 220 v charging stations. Crew was helpful and careful with camera gear handling before entry and two step rinse after.

Ocean Rover, March 2005, Susie Snowdon, McLean, VA. Experience: 1,200 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm and flat, some surge, some strong currents. Best boat and crew I've been with. Boat was custom designed as a dive boat, and it was user-friendly. Food was excellent, as was the service. Diving was best for smaller critters and tropicals. Saw little evidence of tsunami but ran into dynamite fishing and reefs covered with nets.

Ocean Rover, April 2005, Robert Brown (rlhlbrown@msn.com), Lakeville, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, currents. First class operation. The 11 person crew was there for your every need, including help gearing up. Gear was set up for you upon boarding and tanks refilled to 3000 PSI+ (Nitrox available) after each dive. Diving was

from Zodiacs, and they were right there at the end of your dive. No requirement to stay with the group, but always two divemasters to follow if you so desired. No evidence of damage from the tsunami, but there is still dynamite fishing, especially to the North in Myanmar waters. Huge schools of fish at some sites, always lot's to see. Highlight of trip was the ornate ghost pipefish...spectacular. Current on about 1/3 of our dives was from mild to fairly strong. Most traveling was done at night to maximize dive time; up to five dives per day. This boat is purpose built, with a whale deck for easy access to the Zodiacs. Diver accommodations for 16 (2 per cabin), with maid service during the first dive of the day. Cabins were spacious; ample closet and under-bed storage space. Bathroom and shower in every cabin, with large picture window in most. Warm towels following each dive, three hearty meals per day with good variety, and an afternoon snack. Soda pop, juice, fruit available anytime. Beer and wine at extra cost. On-board desalination plant provided all the fresh water we needed, without rationing. www.ocean-rover.com

Ocean Rover, July 2005, Edith and John Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 to Feet. Water: 82 F, calm. A trip on the Ocean Rover by every live-aboard operator should be mandatory to learn just how divers should be valued and respected. Every aspect of diving protocol is covered in a responsible way while preserving diver independence and personal dive style. Divers are "monitored" discreetly rather than controlled. They assist guests

when such assistance is requested or needed, without imposition. They offer such service with respect rather than as manipulation. The attitude of helpfulness is characteristic of every member of the crew. There is always someone to make you feel more comfortable, more relaxed, more satisfied. Ever since a fall on a dive boat back in 2003 that resulted in a back injury, I have needed assistance with lifting dive gear. The crew was gracious in helping me manage and maneuver my dive and photographic equipment on and off the boat. North Sulawesi is a diver's paradise brimming with marine life. You can find macro to wide angle, tiny critters in muck diving to large sponges and fans on vast walls. Hard and soft corals offer contrasts of color and texture as a backdrop for unusual fish. Set your Nitrox computer to the boat blend and stretch out your dive to the max and enjoy every minute. The set up for photographers is ideal, both outside and inside the lounge. There is plenty of space for cameras and housings and for recharging. A computer is available to preview digital images if needed. The staff is helpful in every aspect of photo advice and assistance.

The Junk, March 2005, Thomas Lippert (thomas.lippert@bluewin.ch), Brugg, AG. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Meters. Water: 28 to 29 Celsius, calm. The Junk (www.thejunk.com) is an old Chinese junk (1962) which has even been used in a James Bond movie (the man with the golden colt) and was redesigned several times. We were in cabin with 3 beds (but used it for 2), but there are 2 double 2 triple and 4 bed cabins. All cabins have an

air condition and private toilet shower. The space is limited but worked for two in the 3 bed cabin perfect. The food is plentiful and good. beer and wine have to be purchased. The crew is friendly and helpful, and I almost never touched my equipment. You can follow the guides or do your stuff with your buddy (just follow the general rules). The dive briefings detailed, including what to look for, and the guides are good in finding small critters (and also larger). We were 15 people on board (Thai, German, Swiss, South African, Dutch, Japanese) and used 3 dinghies (each dingy with one guide). It was never really crowded and the BCDs stayed with the tanks which were filled immediately after each dive. There is some spare equipment on board, but bring your own except weight belts, lead, and tanks. The diving was done from the dinghies, with a back roll and coming back with the help of the driver over the side (after handing up all equipment). I did 18 dives (out of 19) in 5 diving days (including 2 night dives). The dive sites are all quite well. We dove the Similan Islands (6 dives

on the ay up and 3 on the way back), Koh Bon, Richelieu Rock, and Surin Islands. We saw Harlequin Ghost Pipe Fish (Similan and Richelieu), seahorses (tigertail in yellow or black at ofline Richelieu Rock), frog fish (Richelieu), harlequin crab, mantis shrimp, blue and black ribbon eels (Similan and RR), Jan's Pipefish an Schultze's Pipefish (Surin), porcupine ray (Surin), leopard sharks (Similan at sharkfin reef), mantas (at Koh Bon, staying for almost 50 min), only 2 reef sharks (one white and one blacktip), and a lot of small crabs (ghost and some which were one a few mm), scorpion fish and lion fish, morays (white eye and ..), octopus, turtles (green and hawksbill) cuttle fish laying eggs, and many types of nudibranchs (the specialty of Kay and Jay, Thai-Swiss dive guide couple). At each place there were many other live-aboards (up to 10), and sometimes too many divers were in the water. UW Photography Comments: rinse tank, DVD player, TL, computer (dive guide has one) is there. Professional videographer on board, dive guides knowledgeable about UWP and helpful.

Undercurrent On Line

The Undercurrent website — www.undercurrent.org — has nearly ten years of back issues, six years of chapbooks and more than 1000 reader reports filed this year and is all available to any newsletter subscriber for a low, online fee.

Become an online member and search our 3000-page, 8-year data bank. Deeply discounted rate available for current newsletter subscribers.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!