

## INDIAN OCEAN AND RED SEA LIVEBOARDS

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### AUSTRALIA

**Kimberley Escape, November 2005, Michael Joest (mijoe@arcor.de), Kehl, Germany.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 150 Feet. Water: 27 Celsius, calm. Three small atoll islands 170 sea miles off Broome, West Australia. These are Clerke, Imperieuse and Mermaid, the Rowley Shoals, which we cruised around on board of the Kimberley Escape. Healthy reefs, lots of fish life like on the Maldives many years ago. Untouched by El Niño or diver crowds. A good mixture of hard and soft coral, some walls pinkish or yellow with an abundance of them. Often drift dives in more or less strong current, mostly wall dives, some coral garden, bommies, crevices, gutters, swim throughs some caves. Vis can be everything between 30 to 150 feet, water temp. 27 degrees Celsius. Highlights : Fusiliers, hundreds dancing a ballet to a music you can't hear, changing directions all together to some unseen signal. A bunch of sailfish snapper, a beautiful painted fish, on a strong current channel drift dive. In 45 m a dark shadow turned out to be my first sunfish on cleaning station, got close, an exhilarating experience. On a blue water dive down to 30 m with plastic drinking bottles to attract sharks with by squeezing them, a noise which makes them curious. Sure enough a 3 m tiger shark came close circled us but something scared him away soon. The other group had 3 hammers. One dive site, Cod Hole, you find huge potato cods — groupers 1.5 – 2 m coming close to touch, must be used to divers feeding them. With the Rowleys, the

distance and the costs will keep it a seldom-visited place and surely will not turn it into a diver's nightmare with too many folk coming. The boat is good but still not up to liveboard standards. Only 3 share heads and showers, don't expect towels after each dive or made beds. Dive platform is great giving easy entry and exit. I would have liked to see a bit more space for everything. Meals are superb and certainly meet live aboard standards. Next year they hope to introduce a bigger boat and are thinking of longer trips to the Rowleys and some northern islands.

### INDONESIA

**Adventure Komodo, Roberta Simon-ton, Denver, CO.** Experience: 500+ dives. I have 500+ dives, most on live-boards. We have been on the Adventure Komodo with Larry Smith twice. This trip was to dive the Banda Sea, which was calm and choppy at times. Though visibility varied every dive allowed us to see and photograph to our hearts content. The amazing creature and fish life increases with each dive. Larry Smith knows this area better than anyone. With his guidance I saw a bobbit worm, Pegasidae slender sea moth, the picturesque dragonet and Mandarinfish dragonet next to each other and while enjoying the dragonets along comes a wonderpus to entertain us. The list goes on, pipefish of every variety, flatheads, cuttlefish, squid, pigmy seahorses, frogfish, lionfish and scorpionfish. A large aggregation of filamented flasher wrasses entertained us a dusk one evening. Bumblebee shrimp, Randall shrimp, gorgonian shrimp, and beautiful anemone shrimp were abundant. There were flagtail bluntnose, red spotted blennies, flashlight fish,

humphead wrasse, pajama cardinalfish, and signal goby to name a few. The Adventure Komodo has made the Raja Ampats accessible, many consider this the last untouched reefs. Larry Smith has been in Indonesia for over thirty years, he knows the waters, the sea life, and has an eye for details. The boat itself is smaller than most live-aboards we have experienced. The cabins are small yet do have ample storage. The lounge area is comfortable. Food is well prepared and presented. The crew, most of whom were on both our trips, are great. Nitrox is available, guests do not handle their dive gear, and the tanks are filled to 3000 PSI. Dives are controlled by the divers computers and time limits nonexistent.

**Adventure Komodo, December 2005, Allan and Barbara Jones, Anaheim, CA. (divers@sbcglobal.net)** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: 79 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. This was our second trip on Komodo H2O. This trip starts in Timor, Indonesia, and crosses the Banda Sea. The first days are around Alor and Wetar Islands and then north east through the Banda Sea. Various sites are dived along the way, including Banda Neira and Guni Api for sea snakes. The Banda Sea is clear, wide angle blue water diving. The last part of the trip is around islands off the western tip of Irian Jaya. Here, the visibility falls slightly due to the food load in the water. Stops are made in the Cape Kri area where the highest fish count in the world was made several years ago. At times, there are just too many fish in the water! Diving is under the direction of Larry Smith, the most knowledgeable dive master in all of Indonesia. Even with thousand of dives under his belt, his enthusiasm is never diminished. Just tell him what you want

to see and follow the 'big yellow fins!' The boat is a fully air conditioned aluminum catamaran and takes 10 passengers with a crew of 10. Diving is done off two tenders with a guide in each. One tender is always on the dive site. Each tender has a hand walkie-talkie and can communicate with each other and the main ship. Normally 4 dives are done per day and the boat moved at night. This is an upscale operation with cordon blue dining service. The owner has vineyards in Australia and serves his wine on board. Snacks, wine and all else except Nitrox are included in the base cost — you're never nickel-dimed for incidentals. Email and Sat phone service is available. Arise about 6:30 am and have fresh baked pastries and fruit, 1st dive briefing and place your order for cooked-to-order breakfast. Do the dive, return to boat and be greeted with fresh juice, and deck towel. After breakfast, dive, more juice and lunch. Then the first afternoon dive, hors d'oeuvres, second afternoon or night dive and finally dinner and fine wine! Repeat this for 14 days. All mission dependent equipment is redundant, dual water makers far exceed fresh water requirements for many daily showers and an oxygen generator is on board. Safety sausages and powered horns are mandatory. When the dive master advises you not to swim around the point — don't, as you will be off to China. The main diving rule is "Don't do any thing stupid!" With over 50 live-aboard trips, we believe this is the best operation in the best waters! Email us for additional info. UW Photography Comments: Good camera table, covered with safety netting during boat movements. Large separate rinse tank for cameras only, water changed frequently. 110 and 220 volt charging in

cabins. Current appears clean without voltage spikes. Once you show the crew how to handle your camera, they follow through perfectly. Crew loads your camera into and out of the diving tenders. Cameras are covered from the sun to/from dive site.

**Adventure Komodo, March 2006, Mary Jane Stoll (stollmjs@pacbell.net), Oakland, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Water: choppy. Larry Smith, whose enthusiasm and ability to find and point out small creatures (and large) that I would otherwise miss, is helpful way beyond usual in my experience. If weather is bad, he is good at finding new spots with a wealth of life. The food is exceptional, and the salon is attractive, and supplied with a good variety of "fish" books. It is a small compact boat, and some might wish for more lounge space, and more bathrooms, but the tradeoff is fewer guests, and high speed. His trips are mostly two or three weeks. I felt well accommodated for my video equipment. We had outlets in the cabins.

**Aqua One, July 2006, Ralph Baker, Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 82 F, calm, currents. Only 10 divers and 12 crew members. The service was the best I have ever had. We were split up among three divemasters. That made for personal dive guides and seeing many more things than I would otherwise. They were excellent at pointing out things, especially the small things. They were attentive and quick to respond. One diver had some anxiety problems and went to the surface. The diver was never alone and the divemaster was reassuring and calmed him down. Fish life is varied. In the colder water there were manta rays. We did see a large mola mola. So many stone fish

that you had to be careful where you put a knee, finger or lay down to take pictures. There was an abundance of small things like box crabs, crinoid shrimps, porcelain crabs, cling fish, sea apples, nudibranchs, pigmy seahorses, bob tail squid, and frog fish both the large and small types. Many turtles. Once the turtle swam in from the open ocean and swam with one diver for some time. The turtle was so close she could touch it. Few large pelagics. I saw one grey reef shark. Only three manta rays. I was told that the ghost pipe fish are more plentiful in September. The Komodo dragons were mating and hard to find. We saw only two but generally they see 10 to 15. The mating season is from July through most of August. What type of wet suit? I brought three. One I use in California, a full 3mm suit and a shorty 2mm. My California suit is a 5mm farmer john with jacket. I was never cold; nor did I notice the many thermoclines in the colder water. I did get warm in the shallows during the night dive where the water would get to 75 degrees F. The divemasters and the other divers had full 5mm suits. They got cold after about 45 minutes. As the days wore on, some divers sat out some dives because of the cold. They do two days in the cold water and three in the warm water. There were currents and some were as bad as those I experienced in Vancouver, Canada. We were dropped on the lee side and warned not to go to far to the edge. Only one person had trouble with some difficult surge; everybody else seemed to manage well. There are 4 dives per day and that includes the night dive. They tell you to dive for only 45 minutes, but that was never enforced. I always got at least 60 minutes and they did not complain. (The dive masters were shivering, though, in the colder water).

As for the boat, it was definitely a luxury liveboard. They claim to hold up to 17 divers, but I would think the divers would be crawling all over each other at the dive stations and on the small sun deck, and salon. The food was good. The bunks are in an L shape with an opening underneath the bunks and at the junction of the legs of the L. They did not have the bunk bed style. Additional storage space was available as drawers under each bunk. Great trip, and even greater service. It was like having my personal dive guide. Worth the 32 hours travel time with a night layover in Bali. And yes, you must pay off the officials who weigh your bags. UW Photography Comments: Camera table away from diving area, crew carried camera to dinghy, put in water tank at end of dive and took back to camera table. Compressed air to blow off housings, lots of electrical outlets both 220v and 110v.

**Baruna Sports, May 2006, Julie Tayloe (jittayloe@sbcglobal.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100+ Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. I had done some homework so I knew what was going on when I was offered a gem to buy from one of the crew. What the travel book said about money changers was also true. Stay on your guard! The ship accommodations were substandard: in need of repair (rear cabin had a perpetually soggy floor, stale odor, head needed updating, on-board desalinators unable to keep up with demand, upper deck in/outdoor grass-like carpet was worn and frayed). The divemaster was unable to give adequate pre-dive briefings as he'd had not much experience in the area. Safety was not addressed: location of O<sub>2</sub>, life preservers, emergency procedures, location of emergency equipment. Officers and crew were not introduced. Food

repetitive and uninspired, alcoholic beverages were \$5 each. UW Photography Comments: No briefing given regarding the use of the U/W tables, resulting in divers placing wet gear in these areas.

**Grand Komodo, Putra Papua, October 2005, Lee Thé (bizthe@comcast.net), Palo Alto, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 86 F, calm. For experienced, self-sufficient divers. Mind-boggling species diversity of every sort, great walls, mostly flat seas (nobody barfed on the trip), not much current by Indonesian standards, reasonable viz, bathtub-warm water, a superior live-aboard crew/boat/company, tasty Indonesian food plus some American (eggs in the morning, fries at lunch), and bragging rights at our dive club once they see my pics. \$3,700 per diver from SFO, including roundtrip airfare to Bali/Flores/Timor, the 12-day live-aboard itself, all transfers and meals, five nights in Bali at 4-star resorts plus one night in Timor, and a driver and an SUV while in Bali. The boat travels most nights. Weather was mainly sunny, only clouding up at the end. Dive after dive I kept seeing new critters. Not a lot of big stuff (except for a herd of humongous humphead parrotfish on one dive and mantas other divers saw on another), but huge varieties of nudibranchs, crinoids, soft corals, hard corals, sponges, sea fans, hydroids, tunicates, crustaceans, echinoderms, holothurians, turtles, sea snakes, fish (blue ribbon eel, seagrass pipefish, pygmy seahorses, leaf scorpionfish, clouds of anthias and butterflyfish, angels and batfish and lionfish oh my . . . we came back from every dive dazzled. I recommend doing the Wakatobi trip as a run-up to Grand Komodo's Komodo/Rinca trip, which features even amazing-er sea life, but

also rollercoaster currents up to 10 kts. (literally) and temps as low as 71 degrees below thermoclines. Everyone on the trip had at least hundreds of dives logged and knew how to take care of themselves. If you're a newbie or rusty go to Palm Paradise Resort at Tulamben in Bali. You'll get easy, safe, shore-based diving, my favorite wreck (Tulamben's Liberty Ship), and a good taste of what Indonesia has to offer as you build up your skills for Wakatobi, Komodo, and beyond. Grand Komodo expects you to know what you're doing. Its divemasters help you if you want help but they let you dive your own profile except in big current drift dives. As one of only two diver-photographers on the boat and with my spouse limited to snorkeling (recovering from a DVT), I surfaced alone on many of the 31 dives we did, and the dinghy man did a good job of picking me up. Be sure to bring a safety sausage, whistle, etc., and surface with 500psi. Don't get greedy. You'll be rigging your own BC mostly. They fill the tanks in place (usually over 3,000PSI), so your tank stays with your BC. Most diving utilizes the dinghy. Occasionally we used the platform on the rear of the boat. Dive intros were good — critical in Indonesia's currents — and Grand Komodo provided two divemasters for the eight passengers on the boat. Also, my wife was able to snorkel at 80% of the dive sites. Usually a crew member snorkeled with her. She was out of luck only at a few sea-mounts. The trip centered on Wakatobi National Marine Park, but we also did our check dive and final dive at a little island near Maumere, and did some of our best dives at Batu Ata, a small isolated island in the middle of the Flores Sea. We dove all the major Wakatobi islands, which the Wakatobi Resort doesn't do by the way. The Putri

Papua is one of the smaller boats in Grand Komodo's five-boat fleet. But it was big enough to do the job. We never felt claustrophobic. Our cabin was reasonably roomy. All meals were served in a shaded, open-air lounge two floors above our cabin. The dive gear area was one deck lower, cabins below that. We did a lot of stair-climbing! The crew — an amicable mix of Moslem, Christian and Hindu Indonesians — was friendly and cross-trained and everyone understood us. On some boats only the divemaster(s) speak English. Not so here. It's a happy, well-run boat. The crew serenaded us on our last night on board. We went ashore several times, once picking up a nice Wakatobi park ranger for a few days. He was eager to learn from us about critters and dive conditions. My wife and I ate everything served — no precautions other than brushing our teeth with bottled water. Both of us got a few mild cases of the runs during the trip, but never enough to require Cipro or Imodium or interfere with our diving/snorkeling. I didn't see a single mosquito on the whole trip (October is toward the end of the dry season), and only got one insect bite, of unknown origin. The nearest hyperbaric chamber is in Bali, so dive conservatively. Fortunately the Putri Papua provides long surface intervals — a necessity in these conditions, I believe. Pellita Air canceled our flight to Maumere (where the boat is ported) as we were en route to Bali. So we flew to Kupang in Timor, stayed overnight there and got to Maumere the next morning, one day late. Grand Komodo handled all changes and shifted the live-aboard to one day later, preserving our full 12 days. Three lessons: (1) Always build some flex into third world travel schedules. (2) Use a dive operator like

Grand Komodo who'll cushion you from the vagaries of local travel. (3) Use Bali for your base in Indonesia. The Balinese economy is largely tourism-based; they know what to do, and you couldn't wish for a warmer welcome anywhere. We stayed mainly in Ubud, far from the tourist ghetto in Kuta, and felt totally safe, day and night, everywhere we went in eastern Indonesia. UW Photography Comments: Ample for digital photographers, with a large carpeted dry table for cameras in the middle of the dive prep area and a camera rinse tank, plus 240V electrical outlets in every cabin (standard two-round-prong Euro-style plugs) as well as a power strip in the lounge area plus two 110V outlets from a large inverter. Also, the dingyman and the rest of the crew were good about handing cameras down to divers in the water and taking them back from them into the dinghy and the main boat. Dives were not expressly photography-oriented, so I had to "shoot and scoot" to catch up with the group. One of the two divemasters was particularly good at finding hard-to-find camera subjects for me, such as pygmy seahorses and minuscule nudibranchs and crustaceans, while the other divemaster kept watch over the group in general. The TV in the lounge area has front-mounted RCA jacks so I was able to plug into it for both reviewing pics and for sharing images with the other divers and crewmembers. No film development provisions onboard, but film is obsolete anyway — right?

**Grand Komodo, Temikura, March 2006, Ben Glick (dglick@vgernet.net), Williamstown, MA.** Experience: 1500+ dives. Vis: 40 to 70 feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm and flat, strong currents. Good boat, fantastic diving in biodiversity central. Variable currents but some

really ripped! Divemasters and crew excellent. Boat traveled to all the best spots. No nitrox. Reefs in perfect condition. Fish life diverse. Dozens of different nudibranchs.

**Grand Komodo, Temu Kira, March 2006, Dave Van Rooy, Ubud, Bali.** (dvanrooy@seabelow.com) Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents, no currents. This was a charter, exploratory 11-night trip to search out good dive spots around Halmahera, one larger but mostly unknown dive areas in the Malukus. Halmahera is the almost-Sulawesi-shaped island half-way between Sulawesi and western Papua. This trip was organized by well-known UW photogs Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock. TemuKira is a 32m wooden phinisi boat with 6 cabins, each with AC and ensuite bathrooms. There's no hot water but the water coming out the tap is warm, heated by the engine. The cabins are small but large enough to get around in. A couple people complained about a bit of diesel smell below, but most didn't notice. Meals were good and plentiful and mostly Indonesian dishes with breakfast more traditional American. We had lots of fresh fish and shrimp. The dive deck is not real large, but the 10 divers managed fine with having 8 cameras. Much diving was from the main boat. The tender boat or the main boat would pick us up, and sometimes cameras would be transferred from the tender. The crew operated extremely well in getting people and gear in and out smoothly. And the captain was skilled at maneuvering the boat to just the right spot. A couple tank valve problems appeared, and there were a few complaints about tank air smelling funny a few times, but I did not notice. They do not offer Nitrox and they do not have storage

tanks, so tank refills could take up to 2 hours running directly from the compressor. But that was fast enough to get in all the diving we wanted (4 per day were usually offered unless we had to move the boat too much). We started in Sorong, and spent one day diving around Wayag in Raja Ampat, which is a beautiful set of islands with loads of soft corals, fans, and tropicals. We then headed west to Halmahera. Generally the diving on northeastern side had poor visibility, a lot of reef bombing, and the corals generally not prolific. We then went north into Kao bay. The vis in this bay was poor (10-20'). We found and dove three Japanese cargo ship wrecks there which were shallow (max depth about 70') and with a fair amount of fish life around. Each wreck did reward photographers with 2 or 3 colorful ornate ghost pipe fish. Heading south from Morotai, the topside beauty in the west was striking. There are many conic volcanoes, mostly virgin forest/jungle areas, and all sparsely populated. At one spot in the south, you can see four perfectly conic volcanic islands in a row (Makian, Moti, Tidore and Ternate) though the first two had blown their tops eons ago. Our next stop on the western side was the Southern Loloda Islands. Here there were two large waterfalls from one of these islands going directly into the sea as well as photogenic rock formations of some islands. Diving off one upside-down U shaped-island was "fishy" and had large schools of tropicals, some black tip sharks, bumphead parrotfish, and at least one large grouper. Unfortunately except for a couple spots, there was a lot of bombing. We dove around Pilongga island, just off Tidore and found nice corals and lots of tropicals. At Mare Island there was a lot of bomb damage, but still had lots of large

bommies rich in critters, soft corals, large fans, tropicals and more. We headed farther south and dove some in the Latalata Islands west of Bacam. The sites we dove here included some exceptionally beautiful reefs with incredible amounts of large multi-colored soft coral, loads of tropicals, and our first encounter with a rather strange sponge endemic in the area which has a net-like surface and came in either white, yellow, or purplish colors. A macro spot that was extremely silty yielded some nudis, and some egg-laying squid. The rest of our diving was in the Goraici Islands in SW Halmahera, which proved to be the richest of all. One spot, dubbed "Reene's Rock," got everyone pumped — incredible soft corals, fans, oriental sweet lips, chubs, schools of bumpheads, black tip sharks, cruising mackerel and tuna, surgeon and unicorn fish, turtles. A second dive there was a bit disappointing as the currents fought us in getting to the good spots. Another spot nearby around what we called Palau Banzai had loads of corals and reef fish and some huge bommies, at least one inhabited by beautiful soft corals and fans, many thousands of glassy sweepers, and a school of about 20 curious and friendly teira batfish. Another nearby spot had probably the most healthy, varied, dense, pristine set of hard corals covering many acres, that any of us had ever seen. Hopefully the bombers don't find it. We visited the capital of Ternate for a couple days - seeing the sultan's crown jewels, some old Dutch forts. Local government officials were actively promoting the area and rolling out the red carpet for us, so we all pitched to make the southwestern part of Halmahera a marine national park that would be protected from the bombers. Expect to

see this listed on the itineraries of some dive operators in the next year or two.

**Grand Komodo Tours, MV Tarata, August 2006, Terry Anderson (tha@tamu.edu), Bryan, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 71 to 84 F, currents. This was our third time with Grand Komodo Tours. The Indonesian government designated the area a National Park in the 1990s and the reefs and marine life are healthy and improving, unlike most of the world. We went on this trip in 2000 and this time there were more whitetip and gray sharks and at least as many manta rays, over a dozen. On one dive 4 mantas circled us for 15 minutes in the warm water of north Komodo (84 degrees), and on a cold water dive (71 degrees) on the tip of South Komodo we saw 6 on two dives, feeding in the rich currents. We also saw an Eagle ray and nice schools of jacks, some tuna and eels, and loads of lion fish and turtles. The locals can only use small fishing boats in the area, (no large foreign ones) and can use only single lines, not nets and no dynamite. You can get fresh 10 or 15 pound tuna off the local boats for dinner, \$4 for a tuna, and still see them in the water. After a week we left the Park and went to Alor, which took two days on the boat and we dove colorful walls with great fans along the way. Out of the Park – no sharks, mantas, or schools of jacks or tuna, but in Alor we saw leaf fish, banded sea snakes, and lots of Mandarin fish. Grand Komodo took us to villages where we had lots of fun with the local people, and enjoyed their Independence Day celebrations on August 17. You just get to Bali with your dive equipment and Grand Komodo will set up your hotels, flights in country, and everything else, including pre- and post-dive side trips. The MV

Tarata can take 12 divers, but we only had 6, so the gal with only 20 dives always had one of the two fine DMs along her side. Dive your own profile on the 3 or 4 dives a day; excellent service, you're the boss, just tell the DMs what you want to see.

**Komodo Dancer, November 2005, William and Frances Ungerman (Elitecorps@aol.com), Santa Ana, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. We boarded the boat in Bali after a delightful three-day stay at the Puri Santrian hotel on the beach. During the eleven-night cruise we experienced the typical Peter Hughes approach to diving, attentive without being intrusive. The boat is ninety-eight feet long, an all-wood sailing/motor vessel, although the sails are never used. (The ones shown in the promo video are unfurled for show only). The extra-wide beam makes for a stable ride even in rough seas, and there were some of those during passage. The crew hoses down the decks three or four times a day to keep the wood from cracking (watch out in bare feet; slippery to the max). Diving is in and around the Komodo National Park and Bali for a day on the return. A total of 34 dives (including many night dives and one nice wreck dive) were offered, mostly four a day, but occasionally three on a transit night. There is a land excursion to a volcanic lake and the signature trip to Komodo Island to see the prehistoric dragons. We had to wade onto the island because the low tide prevented beaching the runabouts. After, we made the land trek 2-1/2 miles in the 103-degree equatorial sun). Saw dragons loitering around the small settlement near the dock. Two park rangers armed with forked sticks take you up the savanna hills and through the parched jungle to look for dragons. It's not as

much fun they say as when the park rangers used to feed the dragons goat meat pieces, but still worth it. You have to run the gauntlet of the natives selling carved dragons, but what the hell. All diving is off two "pangas," designated the "red boat" and the "black boat." Water temperatures vary between 72 degrees and 85 degrees F. Many divers wore seven millimeter neoprene on some dives. Visibility fluctuated between 20 (muck diving) and 100 feet, depending on the site. Expect to see a few mantas and white tip sharks along with macro stuff like pygmy seahorses and little crabs. Frogfish, scorpionfish, and leaf fish are all here. For the macro fan, Lembah Strait is still far superior, and for the wide angle or big critter buff, there're better places, but for a great compromise location, this is a hard trip to beat. Dive briefings were thorough and conducted by a Dutch "Cruise Director" and/or his German/French fiancée. They also lead the dives along with "Wayan," an Indonesia Divemaster and great guy. Safety sausages and EPIRBs are provided and believe me, they are needed. With current and waves, you could be missed and adrift, headed for the Philippines. Several times it took us twenty minutes or so searching for divers who had drifted off. Use of the safety sausage was not uncommon. Signal mirrors? Strobes? Bring 'em. Some notable dives were Cannibal Rock, Torpedo Alley, The Alley (exceptionally great!), Batu Bolong (featured in Scuba Diving magazine), The Estuary, Bonto Reef and the wreck of the USS Liberty (erroneously described as a WW II "Liberty Ship." When paying for our on-board bill we were charged 2.25 percent as a "credit card surcharge." This is disallowed by VISA/MC and the charge was reversed after I protested

upon returning home. Peter Hughes is now only a booking agent, having divested himself of interest in the boats. 32 percent nitrox is available at \$10 per tank or \$200 for the eleven-day trip (9 ½ days of actual diving). The crew sings American ballads and rock songs, e.g. "Country Road" and "Hey Jude" at night. The head steward, "Sebastian", is remarkable, an absolute gem of a guy who's attentiveness is legend. All cabins are below deck except for the "Owner's Suite" on the top deck. For the extra money, it would be worth it, although all cabins are laid out in an effective manner and individually air conditioned with en-suite showers and electric marine heads that work great. There is no smoking except in the wheelhouse. Food is good and the service is impeccable. There are fresh towels and a short back and shoulder massage rendered after each dive. Full one-hour massages are available on board for US \$10. One sunset we watched a million fruit bats migrate from one island to an adjoining one, on the hunt. Amazing sight. Cost was around \$2,700 per person plus air which was an additional \$1,600. Three nights at the Puri Santrian (all arranged by Peter Hughes Diving) was about \$360, a bargain for a 5-star hotel on the beach. I'm still brooding about Hughes tacking on a \$40.00 fuel surcharge after we had contracted and agreed to a price. The area is about 90% Hindu, five percent Christian and five percent Muslim. Everyone who introduced themselves to us prefaced their remarks with, "I'm a Hindu, not Muslim."

**Komodo Dancer, May 2006,**  
**(m.l.gitterman@sympatico.ca),**  
**Toronto, ON.** Experience: 101-250  
dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 74 to 84  
F, choppy, currents. Food was good and  
plentiful, boat staff were great and,

while we initially thought the rooms small, this was our first live-aboard and apparently they were “average.” Diving was mostly great with lots of little critters and some great mid-size fish and good coral. We do not dive Nitrox and dive profiles were given for Nitrox divers. When we encountered a problem, we were told “you should have been diving Nitrox” which we thought was not only not helpful but also unnecessary. We were assisted in sorting out our profiles by another diver who was a divemaster guest. We were not impressed with the lack of assistance by the two dive masters. In all, it was a good dive trip and we learned a lot about our abilities and remembering to do our tables manually. If you are not an experienced diver, don’t expect extra help because you probably won’t get it with the two dive masters that we had. The most experienced one of the three dive masters (a Balinese native) was great and helpful. We never did hear back from Peter Hughes about our complaint. UW Photography Comments: Large table with fresh water. Very helpful and careful staff.

**Mermaid I, August 2005, Phillip Gans (PGans@PGans.com), Golden, CO.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents. It is a great place to visit. There is an incredible variety of creatures, particularly small ones. There lots of really interesting nudibranchs. The corals and sponges were fabulous. We spent a few hours at Komodo national park, and that was extraordinary too. The ship is well run, and nice. It is not an easy place to get to, but it is worth the journey.

**North Sulawesi Aggressor, April 2006, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano, Guaynabo, PR. (guigo34@hotmail.com) Experi-**

ence: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, surge. I wish I had known that this was a charter devoted almost exclusively to muck diving. This fact was not divulged at all and it was a disappointment to see that the ship, with the exception of two sites, never ventured outside the Lembeh Strait, where all the shore-based operators took the divers. As with most muck diving, the visibility was poor and the area nothing short of a garbage dump filled with small critters. Book a hotel in the area and you will do just as well. UW Photography Comments: There was a table ample enough for 10 divers, but not for a full complement of 18 UWP divers.

**North Sulawesi Aggressor, May 2006, Gayle and Robert Bringas, Gaston, OR (robertbringas@msn.com).** Experi-

ence: 500 dives. Vis: 10 to 50 feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm and flat. Cabin 7 is small, no closet; had 2 drawers for storage, wall hooks, medicine cabinet and the space under the sink. Some cabins lack the 2 drawers. Cabins 6 and 7 are aft, accessed by a dimly lit, contortionist stairway. None of the cabins have windows or portholes – so it’s not for the claustrophobic. The bathrooms are comfortably large. Dive days 1 and 3 are five dives per day at sites in Lembeh Strait that are easily reached by land-based operations. Dive days 3, 4 and 5: the boat moves north approximately 30 miles to dive Bangka and Lahaga. These sites are also accessible by day boats. (It’s an 80-minute boat ride from Santika Manado to these sites.) Dive day 6 is back in Lembeh Strait. The diving and critters are awesome. Two rhinopias (one red, one purple) were the highlight. They barely move out of the Strait, and still assess a US\$100 per person fuel surcharge. All the sites visited by the

North Sulawesi Aggressor are accessible by land-based operations, and the rooms at KBR, for example, are spacious, with lots of windows. Took a side trip to a private zoo to see Tarsus monkeys. Got a better view of the monkeys than if we had taken the four-hour tour into the jungle. We had an 8-hour layover in Singapore. Using the transit hotel for 6 hours of it was a good idea. There is a departure tax at the Manado airport which must be paid in Rupiah.

**North Sulawesi Aggressor, August 2006, Linda Dunn, Riverside, CA.** ([terrydunn@charter.net](mailto:terrydunn@charter.net)) Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm. Sulawesi is phenomenal and a nice mix of dive sites — Lembeh, with the weird critters you want and do find; pygmy seahorses, 3 eels in one hole, mantis shrimp, a school of cuttlefish, Bunaken - an underwater wonderland; schools of fish that become routine there; and are usually not seen in schools; no other boats ever at the dive sites; great mix of people from the US, Europe, and Japan on the boat; Capt. Niall just the right mix of being in charge but not full of himself. One of the best live-aboards - total 13 guests. comfortable cabins. Domestic air connections in Indonesia are dicey - waited 6 hours at one airport, Ujung Pandang, before we got to Manado to meet the boat, but the Captain was waiting.

**Ondina, October 2005, Paulino Gonzalez (scubaextreme@hotmail.com), New Port Richey, FL.** Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm, currents. Excellent crew that tries hard to make the trip enjoyable. This trip was led by Debbie Fuggitt, for photographers and she picked the best dive sites and u/w

conditions to maximize the experience. Ricard Buxo, the boat captain and director, made good use of the time and scheduled dives to coincide with mild currents for maximal fish action. Our divemaster David went in the water before every dive to make sure of the direction of the currents and water condition. You never had to carry your tanks or set up your gear after the first time. The crew did all the hard work, so that we could use our energy for max diving enjoyment. Every day we did 3-4 day dives and one night dive. The trip lasted 10 days. Bring a twelve-inch reef point stick or reef hook so as not to touch the reef. As Dr. Gerald Allen and Roger Steen pointed out this is the center of bio-diversity of the world oceans. UW Photography Comments: 220/60 cycles electricity, plus voltage stabilizer of 110 volts available. Huge camera rinse tanks. E-6 Processing, DVD Player, TV Monitor for U/W video. Extremely well set up for photographers. No internet available due the remoteness of the place.

**Ondina, November 2005, Mike Oelrich (moelrich@cox.net), Fairfax, VA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents. Trip was booked with Deb Fuggitt of City Seahorse, Inc., a dedicated photo charter, though non-photographers were welcome, with limited participation. Deb took care of all the arrangements including transfers, overnights, etc., and helped me set up a pre-trip to Lembeh Resort. The charter originated from and ended up in Sorong. Flights back and forth via Manado and Singapore to the U.S. east coast. The Ondina is a traditional Indonesian pinisi-style vessel. Though it has sails, they were only unfurled on the last day as a photo op. The boat is about 30m long and is fairly wide for a

boat of that length. The boat is made from hardwood and is clean and well maintained (the boat goes through a refit each year during the rainy season). There are 8 comfortable cabins with the “standard” single-over-queen arrangement. Each cabin has its own air-conditioning unit. En-suite bath in each cabin and ample storage space for both clothes (in a large deck-to-ceiling cabinet) and luggage (under the bed). The excellent meals, are served in a large air-conditioned salon. On our trip the fare tended to be more traditional food (which Deb requests for her charters) with the occasional European dish thrown in. Vegetarians are easily accommodated if they make their preference known ahead of time. Soft drinks are free with meals and available for a fee at other times. There is a charge for beer. There is a sundeck on the top with a tarp for shade (if necessary) and the available massages are done there. The boat also has a well-stocked first aid room with its own bed, oxygen and assorted supplies. Upon arrival, guests select a station in the “dive locker”, a large room near the stern. Separate room for hanging/rinsing wetsuits. Set your gear up on a tank and it stays there for the duration of the trip. A basket under your station holds your fins/mask/etc. When it is time to dive, the crew loads your tank/BC and your camera onto zodiacs and you proceed down stairs on either side of the boat to board a zodiac. All diving was done from the zodiacs with a standard backroll entry. The boat operators were adept at working together to keep track of guests and ferry them back and forth from the boat. Though there are not a lot of “monster fish”, the sheer abundance of other fish more than makes up for it. Most diving was done in moderate to

slightly strong current as that is what brings out the soft corals and the fish. The zodiac drivers, especially Michael, were adept at judging the current and dropping divers in exactly the right place to hit the sweet spot on the reef. Deb, who has been diving there for many years, was careful to help select the right time and place to dive and if conditions were not optimal, she would request that the boat proceed to a better spot. The current, soft corals and abundant reef fish make for nice wide angle photo opportunities. Schools of barracuda, jacks, and unicornfish were common and the occasional large school of silversides was sometimes thick enough to blot out the sun. While big-animal action was sparse, there were a few turtles, wobbegongs, the occasional flight of rays and rarely, a black tip reef shark and small epaulet sharks. On one night “exploratory” muck dive, was the only “bad” dive of the trip. One site, “Waterlogged”, was particularly good — one can find orange, yellow and “plucked chicken” pygmy seahorses in fans within a span of 50 feet. Another fan contains pink pygs at 15fsw and I found a few more at 80fsw. Interesting nudibranchs (including the infamous “solar powered” variety, which I’d never seen before), small cuttlefish, fire urchins with resident Coleman shrimp, sea cucumbers with commensal crabs and one lucky fellow spent about twenty minutes following a blue-ringed octopus. Some “mangrove-style” diving and we were able to partake at a place called “The Passage”, which is a narrow shallow channel between islands. The tides sweep through the center of the channel so most diving is done along the sides in protected eddys. Photographers are treated to soft corals growing on fallen logs just below the surface

with overhanging trees. Archerfish and halfbeaks are a nice change of pace from the usual reef fish. There were several neat green and black Lamellarids (akin to large cowries). UW Photography Comments: Large covered, padded, camera table that reaches all the way across the stern with a "roll-down" shade that affords protection from direct sunlight and some protection from rain blowing in. Baskets in shelves under the table. Two dedicated rinse tanks next to the camera table with hinged lids that double as benches when closed. Crew is experienced in assisting with camera gear. Compressed air for drying equipment. Cubbies in the "dive locker" with power outlets for chargers — bring your own power strip (220V!) if you want more than one outlet.

**Ondina, July 2006, Jacob Rosenstein (judyjake@pacbell.net), San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 72 to 78 F, choppy. Overall, this is a good dive boat. The dive briefings are detailed and informative. However, once in the water the group split up. When there were currents or poor visibility it was uncomfortable, especially since some divers surfaced far from the pick up inflatables. They were later safely picked up. All diving was done from inflatables. Ricard Buxo was good at showing the marine life. We hiked through Komodo National Park and saw several Komodo dragons. Also had a couple of village tours. Dove the islands of Komodo, Rinca, and Flores. Lots of diverse marine life, from the tiny pygmy sea horse to the huge manta ray. Coral lush and healthy. All the coral in the ID book can be seen in this part of Indonesia. The domestic air carrier Merpati cancelled/changed their schedules several times even up to

departure time, affecting my return International flights. Booked my itinerary from City Seahorse (Deb Fugitt and Tony Mathes) -cityseahorse.com. Very good booking agents for this boat. Boat is generally in good shape, except for the marine head and the hand held shower, which did not have hot water. There is plenty of room for socializing and relaxing. The cabins are well planned with plenty of storage space. Food is good, a mixture of Asian and Western dishes. E-6 color processing was available, as well as Nitrox. Big camera table at rear of boat with storage space for lenses, accessories, etc. Water is colder and green at southern Komodo, but came head-to-head with a giant manta, as the animal just appeared out of the murky nowhere. Four dives max, including night dives were enough for me. The Ondina has a large camera table on the rear of the boat with storage baskets underneath. Also there are individual charging stations, although the bottom ones are near standing water and the top ones are out of reach. Some non photographers use these cubbies for storing towels and wet stuff.

**Pelagian, April 2006, Ronnie Hess (hessrf@yahoo.com), Wescosville, PA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Excellent operation. Cabins were excellent. Food was served to order. Anything you can imagine for breakfast and usually two choices to pick from for lunch and dinner. Boat is spacious and well appointed. All deck areas are covered in once fashion or another to protect from sun. All diving from tenders. Crew is personable. Excellent diving in the Komodo area. Some muck dives in the Butan area. Corals are beautiful and in wonderful shape. Separate inside camera room was

spacious. Plenty of outlets.

**Pelagian, June 2006, Mel Cundiff (Cundiff@colorado.edu), Boulder, CO.**

Experience: 1700 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 81 to 84 F. I teach coral reef ecology at the University of Colorado. The best coral reefs are in Indonesia with Papua New Guinea coming in second, based on the diversity of the critters. By the way, the Caribbean reefs are about 11,000 years old while the Indonesian reefs are more than 20 million years old. I was on the M.V. Pelagian in the Red Sea in 1992 while it was operating under the name of The Fantasea II. Being a 115-ft. deep-hull boat that houses 12 divers and 11 crew members, it is most luxurious with large state rooms, spacious common areas and a staff catering to first-class comforts. Some divers might roll their eyes at a cabin with a king-size bed and walk-in closet! There was ample food and exquisitely presented meals. Entrees and major side-dish choices were individually selected each morning and served at sit-down meals that could be eaten either inside or outside. Ice tea, orange drink, water, canned soft drinks, hot teas, coffee and espresso were always available at no charge. Beers and hard liquor drinks were an extra charge. Reef identification books was in the library. The boat had an up-to-date entertainment center with a wide plasma screen and a large camera room with both 110 and 220 volt sockets. Diving operated out of twin zodiacs off the port and starboard sides, accommodating six divers each. Except for mask, fins, and cameras, all equipment remained on the zodiacs, and the tanks were even refilled there between dives. In changing dive sites, the zodiacs were simply hoisted out of the water with all the dive equipment aboard. Following a fresh-water shower after a dive (there

were seven such showers on deck), we each got a large bath towel hot and creative, hot snacks were often available on the aft deck. The two European dive-masters, Marco and Sissi, were competent, experienced, knowledgeable of the dive sites, and fluent in English. Marco's artistry was evident in his eloquent reef drawings at the dive briefings. A couple of the first and last dives were close to the Wakatobi Resort, but all the rest were farther out and mostly toward the large island of Sulawesi. I did not find the blue-ringed octopus, my number one "Wish List" critter for the last 10 years. This area is not known for the big pelagics, but it maxes out with the diversity of mollusks, fishes, arthropods, echinoderms and many other critters — this, in part, due to an agreement between the local villagers and the resort owners brokered over a half dozen years ago, eliminating fishing in and around the Wakatobi dive sites. Because of the protected reefs around the Resort, Wakatobi is one of the best dive resorts for viewing some of the world's most diverse and healthy coral reefs and has the world's best house reef. As our dive sites moved farther away from the resort, the diversity of fishes and other critters dropped a little. We had strong, rough seas only once for a few hours, the currents were mild and manageable, and our average visibility was about 40-60 feet. My only significant criticism was that we got to do only two night dives. The Pelagian did not begin a major move to another dive site until after midnight. All 12 divers preferred night dives over dusk dives, but the crew outvoted us. Somehow, we thought that was wrong. Maybe the management ought to tune into this? The Pelagian, purchased by Wakatobi this past year, operates a half year in the

Greater Wakatobi area and a half year in the area around Komodo.

**Serenade, April 2006, Wayne Warren-Angelucci, Rancho Santa Fe, CA. (web1.WayneWA@choicemail1.com)**  
Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 28 to 31 Celsius, calm. Vast quantities of colorful, strange and exotic critters. Hard and soft corals were healthy, colorful and varied. Not many pelagics, but heaps of smaller fish on every dive: frogfish, ghost pipefish, pygmy seahorses, leaf fish, crocodile fish, cardinalfish. Many small ornate crabs and shrimp, octopus, cuttlefish, etc. The dive operation was run well with helpful friendly staff, boat crew, divemasters. Really liked the Indonesian food. There were 4 - 5 dives every day of the week. Nitrox.

**Symphony, May 2006, Jeffner Allen, Newfield, NY.** Experience: 251-500 dives Enjoyable diving to the Sangihe Islands, including the underwater volcano and several hot springs, and a few dives, during the return, in Lembeh. The dive term and set up on board was informed, high energy, and well organized. The cook did an outstanding job, inclusive of accommodating special requests. The itinerary through the islands is interesting, underwater, in particular, but also, on land. The Symphony, the smaller of the Murex boats, is fine topside – a long table for meals, viewing photos, and conversation, and some deck chairs. The cabins could benefit from better air circulation, though air conditioning is not needed. The plumbing problem in one cabin was repaired when the boat returned. The cabins are clean, sufficient, and well looked after each day. 4 divers were able to dive for a week without having to pay exorbitant sums. The dive crew is very familiar

with the area, benefitting from Murex's years of experience.

**Voyager, February 2006, Dave Van Rooy (dvanrooy@seabelow.com), Ubud, Bali.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. Maiden voyage of Kararu's new boat, the MV Voyager, which replaces the Sea Safaris III. It's a 4 deck, 46 meter (~150 ft) long, 10 meter beam steel hulled Norwegian ferry, just recently converted by Kararu for diving. It's the sister ship of the Cehili, which used to dive the Banda Sea with Larry Smith in the early 90's. It has 4 decks and lots of room compared to most live-aboards. two engines, 4 generators, and a host of other equipment, including satellite internet connection for email and 2 masseuses. Its 10 cabins have en suite bathrooms, though we were only 14 divers. Quite spacious and different from the typical Indonesian Phinisi vessels. They have a large dive deck and camera storage and work area. Getting on/off tender boats could be a problem in rough seas. For a shake-down cruise, I thought most things worked well though the reverse osmosis water maker broke down, they had a few problems with the Nitrox blending, the tender boats need a bit of redesign on seating, and a few other minor problems. Food was pretty good though sometimes portions were small and timing wasn't always good — they have since changed chefs. This 14 night trip started in Maumere, Flores, then went to Alor, up through the Banda Sea to Gunung Api, Ambon, and Banda Neira, and on thru Misool Islands in Raja Ampat and ended in Sorong, where the boat will be based for the next few months. Because of covering such a large and diverse area, the diving was incredibly varied, from muck full of

critters to rocky terrain full of sea snakes, to pristine walls covered in soft corals and gorgonians and loads of tropicals with occasional sharks (black tip), turtles, tuna and the like. The variety and selection in such a trip are hard to match. Our diving in the Maumere area and Alor had lots of nice critters including clown frog fish, bobbit worm (1.5" diameter), a recently discovered rare blue lion fish, zebra crabs and Coleman shrimp on fire urchin, several orange ringed pipe fish dancing together, and a host of others. The Biangebong spot in Alor is particularly rich in muck critters. Then off to Gunung Api diving with dozens of sea snakes, with many handling them and posing for pics. We then went on to Ambon, being the first live-aboard back there since the troubles began years ago. We had a red carpet welcome including a feast and special dance put on by the new Maluku Dive Resort. Some great stuff at the harbor pier area, the first (?) muck spot (1994 on Cehili with Larry Smith, Burt Jones, Maureen Shimlock). But it's a lot trashier now, and lots of old, noisy boats made it appear not so safe to dive. A couple of dives got aborted due to raging currents coming up. Moved to a new site off Nusa Laut, east of Ambon. Most of the 14 of us rated this dive as one of the most beautiful dive spots we'd ever seen — a beautiful wall opening to loads of bommies covered with dense brilliantly colored soft corals and fans in about 30' with so many schools of fish, we gave up counting. A passing leopard shark added to the excitement. Truly a wide angle extravaganza. We moved on and dove Banda Neira area — one of my favorite spots anywhere, and not just for diving — for two full days, one extra due to a storm that came up. But everyone was quite happy to stay as the

place is so incredibly interesting and full of history (it's the place Columbus was searching for in his journey to the new world, but it's almost totally forgotten by travelers now). Diving in the harbor is exceptional to say the least — dozens of mandarin fish usually out. The prime attraction for us was watching a school of squid (18" to 2') lay eggs at the same spot every few minutes. They'd come in pairs or larger groups and flash colors and poses, and the female would lay the egg in the branches of a tree while the larger male hovered overhead. Several of us were doing 5-6 dives/day. Shore expeditions to the market and around the island and shopping for spices and pearls, along with touring the old Dutch and Portuguese forts added variety to the diving being offered. After the weather settled down we moved on around Seram, missing Koon where we'd hoped to dive, but waters were still too rough. An exploratory dive near the eastern end didn't yield much so we moved on to Misool Islands in Raja Ampat area. This area is amazingly beautiful topside, at least rivaling Palau's rock islands. And it's rich in wide angle and macro critters, including Torizumi shrimp, wobegong sharks (two, each about 5'), great soft corals and sea fans. We did a few land "expeditions" besides Banda Neira, including visiting one of the few villages still allowed to whale (using dugouts and old harpoons manually thrown), a couple villages in the Alor area, Ambon, and a tender-boat tour of the rock islands. Voyager has a roomy setup for UWP's with lots of storage and work space. Rinse tanks and special handling by crew and two large rinse tanks. Big battery recharge area.

**Voyager, Sorido Bay Resort, April 2006, Dick Joseph, McDonough, GA. (Dick@greenspanmarketing.com)**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. My wife and I spent 11 nights aboard the Voyager cruising the Raja Ampat Islands off the coast of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya), followed by a 10-night stay at the Sorido Bay Resort on Kri island. The Voyager is staffed by friendly folks and excellent dive masters. Our cabin was reasonably spacious with an ensuite head providing hot water on demand. The food was adequate and plentiful and there are wine and beer for purchase. The diving is extraordinary! Though not enamored of live-aboards – the constant din of the diesel exhaust denies the sublime quiet of time at sea — the opportunity to visit the variety of dive sites afforded by such mobility makes the Voyager a must. The soft corals of Misool are breathtaking and there's no other way to dive the site. The crew has no mechanism for dealing with irresponsible divers. For example, an individual with a digital camera would spend a considerable amount of time on a particular subject, all the while destroying the coral in the area around his fins. After witnessing this on repeated dives, I spoke to the crew but they failed to intervene. Other divers witnessed this outrage but felt it was inappropriate to address the issue, not wanting to “rat” on a fellow diver. I loathe rules inhibiting accomplished divers but there comes a time . . . The crew of the Voyager accommodated us by enabling a meeting at sea with one of the dive boats from Sorido Bay. These boats are open to the sun and weather and there is but one seat. This is the only down side to Sorido Bay. Each cabin is but meters away from the gentle loll of the ocean. Reading on the chaise lounge on the porch following the day's dives often leads to rereading the same page three or four times

before giving in to sleep. The bed's comfy and the shower's first rate with all the hot water you need. The room has an AC but Max, the owner, suggests it only be used after 5 p.m. You will not wish it any other way. But you don't go half way 'round the world for a hot shower. The diving's killer. Everything from absurdly small pygmy seahorses to two-meter wobbegong sharks on virtually every dive. Wanna see mantas? You've come to the right place. Nothing takes your breath away like a juvenile barramundi or a juvenile pinnate spadefish. A never-ending parade of bizarrely resplendent flatworms and nudibranchs, lionfish, stonefish, pipefish, crocodile flatheads; the list goes on and on. And the corals! Each dive different, each depth different. Love those moments when your dive guide points directly at something and you still can't see what it is? How about a pair of spiny waspfish looking more like dead leaves than living creatures? The dive guides at Sorido Bay are excellent spotters. The downside is that their command of English is extremely limited. The upside is the resort's library; the most extensive I've ever seen. But wait! There's more! I looked forward to the lunches and dinners, not to mention some yummy appetizers. Scrumptious local dishes await those with an adventurous palate (and there's tame stuff for those so inclined). Lots of it, too. Wine is hard to get in these remote parts so unless you bring your own all you can get at Sorido Bay is beer. Fortunately, besides the local stuff there's Guinness. The Voyager provides spacious accommodations for each photographer including charging stations. All of this was on the dive deck. Sorido Bay also provides plenty of space in the room with good lighting and a sink, as well as outlets for

charging.

**Voyager, May 2006, Gayle and Robert Bringas (robertbringas@msn.com), Gaston, OR.** Experience: 500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 84 to 86, calm and flat. Room 107 is the best. Spacious: 2 closets, 4 large drawers for storage, desk with computer hook-ups; 2 chairs, foot stool, nice window that could be opened. Cabins were quiet, no engine or generator noise. Vessel is a 150-foot steel monohull. Boat has lots of stairs. Outdoor dining/bridges/sundeck on top deck. All guest cabins on deck below that. The dive deck is below the cabin deck. Galley and indoor dining area on 4<sup>th</sup> deck. Masseuse on board. Large, covered dive deck; lots of camera space. Two twin-engine dive skiffs. Crew was helpful and friendly. They set up your gear. They cleaned up everyone's gear at the end of the trip. Bottle of wine and two glasses in the cabin when we arrived (although we never drank it, so don't know if they would have charged us for it or not). Welcome aboard packet included: Kararu T-shirt, slippers and key chain. Food was plentiful, varied and well-prepared. The chef had theme nights: Italian, Indonesian, BBQ, Mexican, etc. Several vegetarian guests; their selections looked appetizing as well. Out of a possible 37 dives, Bob made 34 dives; Gayle made 26. Dive guides cater to photographers, finding all sorts of small critters – this must be the pygmy seahorse capital of the world! Bring a magnifying glass. Large schools of barracuda, spade fish, snapper, etc. Our first sighting of “disco clams” (called a “flame shell” in the identification book). Saw several wobbegong sharks. Glorious, healthy reefs. Couple of night dives were muck dives. The Voyager traveled to many locations around Raja Ampat and Misool, giving us the feeling

that we got some value from our \$150/person fuel surcharge.

**Voyager, June 2006, Lauren Greider (scubama@hotmail.com), Encinitas, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 125 Feet. Dive restrictions: Avoid decompression dives. The boat is industrial looking on the exterior but comfortable and stable. My room was spacious, with slate floors and granite counters in the bathroom. Each room has individual air-conditioning units and controls and they worked well. I glanced into several other rooms (future trip planning) and they all looked nice. All had individual bathrooms except the two single rooms that shared a good sized one. There were some cockroaches but they are working on getting rid of them. The dive deck was large and had individual storage under the tanks. We dove from tender boats. The food was good and well prepared. Each evening was a different theme. It was occasionally too spicy, but the other guests were fine with it. They were great about special diets and alternate foods. Bottled water was available. The dive guides know the area well and know how to look for interesting critters. They did a good job spreading us out so we weren't all waiting to photograph the same subject. Sasha, the boat owner, joined us on some dives. He was enthusiastic and fun to be around. We dove Lombok Island, where the visibility wasn't great but the critters were. Our first dive we dropped in on a Caledonian stinger! We dove around Sumbawa Island (with short land excursion to a salt water lake), Sangeand Island, Komodo, Rinca, and one day around Bali. The water was about 81 degrees everywhere but Komodo and Rinca where the water was colder and about 75. I was grateful to have brought a 3 mm and a 5 mm

wetsuit and a hood. The water had a good deal of life and diversity but also remarkably good visibility most sites. I saw stone fish, scorpion fish, jaw fish with eggs in his mouth, small octopus, long arm octopus, blue and black ribbon eels, banded pipe fish, dragonets, star gazers, ornate ghost pipe fish (many), anemone fish and crabs, boxer crabs, zebra crabs on fire urchins, large and small frog fish, leaf scorpion fish, squat lobster, cuttlefish, pygmy sea horses, small cowries, gardens of corals, many different shrimp, torpedos, rays, bobtail squid, flat worms, turtles, several white tip sharks, sting rays, lion fish, bat fish, and beautiful nudibranchs: chromodoris, nembrotha, glossodoris, berthella, flabellina, phyllodesmium and others. We took a beautiful ranger-led walk on Komodo Island. We saw one lazy Komodo dragon that posed for us without incident! In Horseshoe Bay on Rinca we could see monkeys on the beach in the morning and the Komodo dragons in the afternoon. We went to shore one afternoon and actually saw two of the dragons mating! UW Photography Comments: The camera area had cabinets with work surfaces above them. There were 110 and 220 volt outlets on all of the work stations. There were two large dunk tanks on the main boat. The crew was careful with our cameras on the tender boat.

**Voyager, August 2006, Bob and Doris Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net), Fallbrook, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 68 to 78 F, currents. This trip was an 11-night Bali to Bima itinerary with much diving within Komodo Marine Park; it was a Light and Motion videography/photography workshop conducted by Dan Baldocchi and Michael Topolovac which was excellent for videographers

and photographers at all levels. Michael and Dan are extremely knowledgeable and were always available for questions and assistance. The Voyager has been converted from a Norwegian auto ferry; it is big and stable in the water but not configured like a typical live-aboard which makes it somewhat inconvenient to get to the dive deck. The dive deck is spacious and the photo room is large and equipped with plenty of charging stations. Excellent and attentive divemasters, dive deck crew and tender drivers. The diving is from three tenders that divers board with tanks on their backs, although for those who can't, the crew will happily put your tank in the tender and help you get set up. Diving is excellent; didn't see much in the way of big stuff (a few mantas and an occasional shark) but the variety of small critters and hard and soft corals and the proliferation of color are amazing. One incredible find was a 2-1/2-foot-long Spanish Dancer nudibranch. We experienced a significant amount of strong current diving, some of which was potentially dangerous and there was not enough discussion during the dive briefings of the nature of the current, the strength or severity of which was glossed over or downplayed. There seemed to be a disconnect between the needs of the photo/video workshop attendees (who expected calm water to focus on photography) and the boat's adherence to its itinerary despite severe currents at pre-planned dive sites. The water in the north was about 78 degrees and about 68 to 70 in the south. The boat crew/staff was attentive, friendly and anxious to please. For the most part, food was tasty; nightly dinners each had a different theme: Greek Night, Japanese night, Indonesian night, etc., but food wasn't particularly plentiful for a bunch

of hungry divers and between-dive snacks were sparse. Only two crew members were assigned to getting meals on the tables and since the food was prepared on the lowest deck but served on the upper deck, the service was slow and drawn out because those two guys were constantly up and down three flights of stairs carrying two or three dishes at a time. Cabins are comfortable; not particularly spacious but plenty of storage space. Towels are changed only every three days (not acceptable for a "luxury" live-aboard) but if you remember to ask, they will be changed more often. Two well-located "staterooms" that cost more and come with some perks like robes (which guests get to keep), a bottle of wine and a private computer (for email only). Bathrooms were spacious and had new and modern fixtures that worked. Trip included a hike on Rinca Island to see Komodo Dragons and a mini-tour of Bima on Sumbawa Island. This was our 32nd live-aboard trip so we felt we had a good basis for evaluating the trip and the boat. UW Photography Comments: A totally secure dedicated photo area with lots of bench space and plenty of charging stations and away from wet areas but next to dive deck.

**Voyager, September 2006, John M. Damas (acesbraces@aol.com), Orland Park, IL.** Experience: over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 68 to 83 F, flat to choppy. Eleven days taking an underwater video workshop by Light and Motion on the 150' Voyager run by Kararu Dive Voyages out of Bali. Customer service and the diving exceeded expectations. The crew of 19 caters to every need of a maximum of 18 passengers with promptness, efficiency and a big smile, always. The owner, Sasha, a German ex-pat, was training the new cruise directors,

Hergen and Kerry. They insured the guests' comfort on the water, under the water and on the land. First Mate Pac John started by met us at the Bali airport and took us to our hotel. Then a prompt pick-up the next day for transportation to the boat. The Voyager is a 150' former research vessel, recently refitted to be a dive boat. The dive deck is huge, with loads of space for everyone's gear. A fresh towel with your name on it is always hanging above your gear station. Several clothes lines were available to dry your wet suits. Beyond the dive deck was a for cameras and video gear. Three 15' long tables allowed more than ample space for cameras, lights and chargers. The electricity was supplied by several voltage regulators in both 110v and 220v. Cabinets under the counters held all of our cases and supplies. Cabins were spacious, clean, comfortable, and made up twice daily. A thorough and accurate briefing preceded each dive, and divers were assigned to one of the three tenders on a rotating basis. Dive sites were always within five minutes. Our divemasters, Seno, Gusti and Yoman, found more fish and critters than I could possibly hope to video! We saw frogfish, lionfish, cuttlefish, leafish and nudibranchs galore. Throw in a few sharks, mantas, pygmy seahorses and the occasional blue-ringed octopus with more lush coral than I have seen anywhere. The Komodo Dragons on our land excursion were a real highlight! After your dive (everyone was allowed to dive their own computer profile), one of the tenders would pick you up and take you back to the Voyager. Two tenders remained over the dive site and all three were in constant radio contact with each other for the ultimate in diver safety. Conditions ranged from flat to slightly choppy seas

under warm, sunny skies. Food was served before, between and after the four daily dives. The chef did a wonderful job in preparing a large variety of meals, always hot, tasty and plentiful. Theme dinners every night — Italian, Greek, Thai, Vietnamese, Balinese. After dinner, Dan Baldocchi (dan@lmindustries.com) and Michael Topolovac from Light Motion Industries (dan@lmindustries.com) would screen divers' video clips from the day's diving. Dan's Light and Motion video and photo workshop was a fantastic experience. Cost of the 11-day trip (34 dives) was \$3500, including airfare back to Bali from the end point of Bima. Nitrox (supplied by Haposan — aka Mr. 32) for 11 days was \$200. Our host Sasha even accompanied us to check in at the airport and got all 16 divers' gear on board without any excess charges!

## MALDIVES

**BAANI ADVENTURER, AUGUST 2006, DAVID VICKERY AND SUZANNE LEESON (TWO DIVERS@ATL.NET), HOBOKEN, NJ.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. Rates are cheaper in the low season, and at \$1,136 each for a suite, less than half what you'd pay on the Peter Hughes boat. The Maldives in the low season is apt to be a trifle rainy. We only lost one dive due to weather. The week started OK, turned cloudy, then rainy, then sunny, and finished brilliantly. There are only three dives a day on the Baani fleet. The Baani Adventurer is a four-deck monohull, 100 feet long with a 28-foot beam. Bottom deck is the engine room and engineering, the top deck is an exposed sun area with two chaises, although you could conceivably heave a few more up from the lounge area

below. Unless you have skin like a rattlesnake, it's not worth it. When the sun is out, you can burn in 15 minutes. The main deck houses the salon/dining/bar area, a few cabins, and the alfresco dining tables that also serve as the briefing area. The upper deck accommodates the two suites, the bridge, and a partially covered lounge area with about 8 chaises. Like all Maldivian dive boats, diving is from a dhoni that carries all the gear, the compressor, a selection of aluminum 80s and a few 62s. Tanks have DIN valves, but most were outfitted with adaptors for yoke rigs. No Nitrox. Fills were 3,000 psi. First dive was a 6:45. Then breakfast of fruit, pancakes, toast, eggs or cereal. Oh, and tuna mixed with onions and eggs or another left over. Second dive was at 10:30. Lunch was the big meal of the day with burgers, cold cuts, basic salads, pastas, curries or other Asian dishes. And tuna. Ice cream was served at each lunch. Dinner might be fish, another Asian dish, potatoes or rice, a well-done steak, fruit or cake for dessert, and, you guessed, it, tuna. We would make any lengthy crossings during the lunch break, with a third dive at 3:00. There were no nighttime crossings. The group of six Germans, four Americans and two French got along well, and were all pretty much on the same skill level. We thought the best place to sit was on the bench on the forward main deck. You could see everything and the breeze was better than the A/C in the cabins, which never went below 78 degrees. Once the A/C failed but was repaired during the next dive. The first day we didn't get the whole group together until noon before departing Male. There was a check out dive in the afternoon in medium current. Three large turtles, titan triggers, honeycomb and black cheek