

for living and the noise level is lower when tanks are filled. It also gives the advantage that dive sites can be reached easier while the main boat is anchored in calmer seas. Weather was cloudy and overcast with the occasional rain shower. We had lots of wind. All dives are drift dives in low to medium currents. If you want to remain stationary, the use of a reef hook is encouraged. Visibility is somewhere in the 30–40 feet range mainly due to the plankton rich water. This, on the other hand, is the reason for all the mantas, sharks and whale sharks that we saw. In one case, two whale sharks and a manta feeding at the same time. Besides big fish, we encountered frog fish, tons of anemone fish and other smaller reef fish. I would rate the diving and destination a notch below Galapagos but just by a tiny margin.

## RED SEA, EGYPT

**Blue Pearl, March 2006, Jon Bank (jonbank@mac.com), Bethesda, MD.** Experience: 100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 21 to 23 C, calm and flat. Wonderful boat.

**Emperor Infinity Safari, June–July 2006, Jamie Pollack (Jamie@empiredivers.com).** Experience: 500+ dives. Water: 80–83 F, calm. Red Sea route: Elphinstone, Big and Little Brothers, Daedalus Reef. Seas were unusually calm; water was like glass (this, however, is not the norm). The diving here was good but not exceptional. All dives were wall dives so it got to be a bit boring as all dives looked the same. I did see lots of critters like schools of tuna and snappers, huge Napoleon wrasse, turtles, octopus, tons of anthias, butterfly fish, etc. The vis was not that

great on some reefs, particularly Daedalus Reef, when we were searching in the blue for sharks. We did see hammerheads but probably not as many as were out there. We were privileged to see a whale shark; this, however, is not the norm. The crew were always friendly and willing to lend a hand. However, this was not champagne diving where you needn't touch your equipment. The operation is run by Brits, as were our dive guides, Richard and Ally, as well as our fellow passengers, who smoked all the time, before and after dives! Food was pretty good. There were always lots of choices and the quality of the veggies and fruits was good. We did a total of 17 dives in 5 days. We were only permitted to do one night dive since we dove most of our sites in a marine park where currents can be strong. Dive day was like this: 5:15 am wake up call for briefing and dive, eat breakfast, rest, brief and dive, lunch, rest, then two afternoon dives with a snack in between, ending with dinner. Nitrox was free except the compressor broke the last two days of diving. The diving was mostly done off Zodiacs split into two groups of eight. Before each dive one of the dive guides would give a briefing. You were allowed to dive your own profile. The crew logged each of our dives — depth and time, air in and out. The guides did not dive with us on every dive nor check the current on every dive. This proved to be a problem on only one dive where we were diving against the current. The boat was large enough to accommodate all 18 passengers plus 8 crew members. However, the design has several problems. For being a dive boat, the dive deck is exceptionally small. All tanks are crammed right next to each other with no space in between. This made it difficult to put your wetsuit on

near your tank and BCD. You had to gear up somewhere else and then wait for people to get out of the way. The dive deck has a large seating area, small area for gear and large platform at rear with two fin-ladders. When out to sea, the large platform area was used to store the two Zodiacs. The equipment table to accommodate the cameras and video cameras was too small. There were two small rinse buckets for masks and cameras but were not marked clearly and soon became mixed together. Cabins were small but had their own toilet and shower. Paper was not allowed to go down the marine head. No hair dryers were supplied. To access the top sun deck there was an awkward staircase. Then there was a rail that you had to climb over which was tricky in bad seas. The TV to view photos and videos had psychedelic spots on it. Before this we did two days of day boat diving in Sharm El Sheik with Emperor Divers. We enjoyed the diving here a lot. All in all, Emperor divers is a safe and well-run operation.

**MV Tala, December 2005, Sandra Tullis, Sunnyvale, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 71 to 73 F, calm. Launched in July 2005, the MV Tala is 120ft long and can handle up to 22 divers. The salon where meals are served is a huge wood paneled room with comfortable couches and a full bar. Coffee and tea are available 24 hours a day. The cabins are about the size of those on the Nekton Pilot (i.e., above average size) with 2 outside suites that are even larger. Each cabin has its own A/C and bathroom including shower and is cleaned daily. The bathrooms are small. On the dive deck, there is a water cooler, a head with heated shower, 2 freshwater showers for rinsing gear and 2 freshwater dunk tanks for cameras

and masks. There are also bins under the wide benches to store fins and other wet things, as well as wall shelves for small items you want to keep dry. The top sundeck has another water cooler, a bar and several padded loungers for those between dive naps. The separate TV room doubles as a classroom. The captain has many years of experience in the area, which is important as you will see there are several liveboard wrecks in the area as a result of less experienced crew. Southern Marsa Alam Itinerary: Mooring ropes, not anchors, are used by all boats. There is no fishing allowed on the reefs. Some areas are still recovering from crown of thorns damage but most reefs look healthy. Used a drysuit with a light undergarment since we were doing several long dives a day. My understanding is that in the summer, a 5m wetsuit is fine. Reefs usually start at 10 or 20 feet and go to 200+ so there is plenty of dramatic diving in all depth ranges. Currents can vary but you can usually find a sheltered side of the reef. We dove from a zodiac about 50% of the time and just jumped off the back of the boat for the rest. We chose to do all diving with a DM. Dive briefings were detailed. Saw lionfish, octopus and cuttlefish (particularly on night dives), giant loggerhead turtles (bigger than Kona HI turtles!), giant moray eels, oceanic white tip sharks (that like to follow divers), white and black tip reef sharks, 4ft long napoleon wrasses, eagle rays, blue spotted rays, large pufferfish, crocodile fish, barracuda and guitarfish. Our favorite dive site was Elphinstone where we got to swim with Oceanic whitetip sharks. Nitrox 32% is blended continuously. They also do custom helium mixes at an additional cost. Wetsuits, drysuits, regulators and BCs are available for rent. Just let them

know what you need in advance. Rental regs are in DIR configuration. You can also rent scooters, which we did and had a great time buzzing around coral configurations once we had a quick tutorial on scooter use. Single tanks have thermo valves that can be Yoke or DIN and doubles tank setups are available. All tanks are AL 80s. Weights and belts are included. The chef has 27 years' experience. As a vegetarian, the meals were the best I have had on a boat and much better than anything we ate in Cairo sightseeing. Produce from the Nile delta and homemade falafel is not to be missed. The carnivores told me that the fish dishes were excellent. Fresh juice is brought to you when you surface from a dive. The best way to communicate with the Tala is through the two email addresses, [faisal@redseaexplorers.com](mailto:faisal@redseaexplorers.com) and [info@redseaexplorers.com](mailto:info@redseaexplorers.com) Copy both on all communications including booking. If the boat is far from port it will be a few days before you get a response. If you want to come straight to Marsa Alam (deep south) where the Tala is docked most of the time, Red Sea Explorers (RSE) can set up a flight from Frankfurt Germany directly to Marsa Alam. We chose to go to Cairo to sight see, so RSE set up a flight from Cairo to Hurghada and then a 3.5 hour car ride from Hurghada to Marsa Alam. They reserved our Cairo hotels and setup the transfers and tours and can do a 3 or 5-day itinerary. The knowledgeable young lady who led our tours of Giza, Memphis, Saqqara, Museum and old Cairo was Islamic but did not wear the traditional head covering. I would highly recommend Lady Egypt tours. Had several problems with the land transfers (airport etc.) through another agency. I would make sure RSE is not using the same transfer agent

before making final commitments. Although the website shows credit cards accepted on the booking page, they prefer cash due to high card fees in Egypt. We brought travelers checks and cashed them in Egyptian pounds at the Hurghada Marriot. UW Photography Comments: The salon has 4 wide shelves for charging lights and camera batteries at either 110 or 220 voltage. Call ahead to make sure there are enough 110V charger adapters. The DM will download digital pictures from your camera and burn a CD for you. There is no E6 processing.

**VIP One, April 2006, Alan Mayfield ([alanmayfield@yahoo.com](mailto:alanmayfield@yahoo.com)), APO, AE.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 70 to 74 F, calm. I traveled to Sharm with two friends from Athens through Cairo. At midnight upon arrival at Sharm airport, we were met by a driver from the Red Sea Diving College and transferred to our hotel. We checked in at the College and spent that day looking around. The next afternoon, we were transported to the boat in a marina across town from the College. The accommodations were outstanding. Each room had a bath with shower. It was well kept and the beds were comfortable. The common areas were large and the only area that was crowded was the dining area. There were 15 divers on the boat. The Divemaster decided to reverse the usual itinerary, to put us on reefs when they were not crowded and all the sites we visited were practically ours alone. We had a day of bad weather, but as a benefit of a live-aboard, we were able to move into a small lagoon and dive inside the reef that afternoon without problems. The weather did delay our visit to the Thistlegorm by a day. All the sites, except one were beautiful. The day

we dove Jackfish Alley, we waited for several day boats to leave the area and the site looked “picked over.” Nitrox compressor was not working after the first day of diving. That day we mentioned we were told that it would cost 50 euros extra for Nitrox for the week and the divemaster told us that it normally costs 150 euros for a week of Nitrox. He said that he would call back to the college to check and when we returned from that dive, then we were told that the compressor was broken. That made me wonder if our quoted price for Nitrox may have played a part. The boat had just come out of dry dock and one improvement they made was that they installed a “Whip” to fill tanks. This allowed us to return from a dive and put our tanks (or should I say, ‘have them put’) in the tank holder near the bench where we kitted up. Before the change, you had to take your tank to the compressor and then move it back to your kit-up area. The service was outstanding and the food was excellent. Our Divemaster, James, led us to the good spots and let us do our own thing. The divers were experienced and the diving was great. UW Photography Comments: A tank to rinse the cameras was available. There were no laptops to download pictures on, but many electrical outlets to use.

## SINGAPORE

**Empress, 2006, Peter H.** Ten day trip aboard the MV Empress, out of Singapore, owned and operated by Vidar and Alice Skogleie. We covered more than 800km of the S China Sea, from near the coast of Sarawak to offshore Vietnam. No recorded GPS positions were permitted of the eleven wrecks dived. Four wrecks were

unidentified and presumed dived for the first time. Others included the Japanese WWII cruiser Shimatzuki and the D’Artagnan, a French liner used as a Japanese troop carrier and sunk by the US submarine Puffer in 1944. Seven CC rebreather divers used four Megalodons, two SportKiss and one Mk15.5. Two additional divers used open circuit rigs. Surface supplied O<sub>2</sub> was used by some divers at 15’ and 30’ deco hangbars. The boat was also equipped with a Haskell O<sub>2</sub> booster, continuous flow tri-mix blender, an on-board decompression chamber (not used) and a lift/elevator cage for divers return to the deck [used by all and particularly appreciated by this geriatric diver]. All nights and many hours during the days were spent underway, usually with side-scan sonar deployed to search for new sites. Dive briefings were sometimes minimal, likely due to the unknown nature of the wrecks. In other cases, were accompanied by books, charts and photos. The boat was anchored and allowed to drift over the wreck. A breakaway line was then attached from the boat deck to the top of the wreck. Wrecks were rarely dived more than once, permitting less experienced divers little orientation or exploration. This was apparently not typical of usual trips, but appropriate to an exploratory expedition. Dive depths were 34 to 105 meters, with only three of the 14 dives shallower than 60m; the others averaged 71m (63m-85m). With few exceptions, a thermocline dropped temperatures to less than 20C at depths greater than 70m. Below the thermocline where most wrecks lay was silty, light was poor and visibility typically 1-2m at most. [I almost knelt on a lionfish; even with a 50w HID light, I couldn’t see my feet] The current was usually less than 1 knot, either at depth