

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 O₂ was used by some divers at 15’ and 30’ deco hangbars. The boat was also equipped with a Haskell O₂ 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

or on the line. Not typical of diving in this region. But is indicative of the professionalism and capability of this outfit. This boat does other shallower dives and different itineraries, including Indonesia. Probably no one knows more wreck sites than Vidar, who has been diving these waters for 15+ years. Food was good in quantity and quality, mixing European and Australian food with Indonesian, i.e., well known dishes with optional spicy ones. Cabins (total sleeps nine, 2-4 persons/cabin) were all air-conditioned and cleaned daily. Two heads/showers total. The owners live aboard, so there are books, music and TV. Recreational-dining area is used for dive setup during the day and consists of outdoor benches and a few sturdy chairs, but is covered. Fully accommodates nitrox/heliox/trimix.

THAILAND

Colona VI, April 2006, Edward Dixon (efdixon@yahoo.com), Singapore.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, surge. Very good trip for a two-day weekend live-aboard. Amazed by the sheer volume of fish at sites like Hin Muang and Hin Daeng. Huge schools of various small fish teeming over reefs, as well as large schools of bigger fish (including a small school of large barracuda). Second dive group saw a whale shark. Despite having to reroute second day to more "day-trip" sites, still impressed with the life off-shore of Phuket. Competent and efficient live-aboard crew, guides, etc. UW Photography Comments: Rinse tank on dive deck; small but crowded table on deck. Electrical supply in all rooms and good counter/table space for small room.

Mermaid II, March 2006, Jonathan

Scolnick (scolnick@berkeley.edu), Berkeley, CA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 85 F, calm, currents. The Mermaid II was nice and rather inexpensive. I took the four-day trip to the Similan and Surin Islands; they also offer a three-day trip to the south of Phuket which can be done together as a one week cruise. We did four dives a day for the first three days and then two on the last day before motoring home. Good briefings were given before every dive. Some sites had a mild to moderate current, but you just had to surface with your marker when you ran out of air and the dingy would pick you up. Beginners and experienced divers all had a good time. The Similan and Surin islands were amazing. Soft coral everywhere and more fish than I could count in a lifetime. The third day's first dive, 30 minutes with a whale shark. Dive two, manta ray. Dive three an octopus and many turtles. I spent much of the fourth dive watching blind shrimp cleaning house for a gobi. Many dive-masters had never seen a whale shark, and Andrea, the leader of the trip, had not seen one in six years. Reefs, fish and macro life were so fantastic UW Photography Comments: There was a camera only rinse tank, but no camera table near the dive deck. There was plenty of space for working on cameras once they were dry in the lounge. The crew were extremely helpful with photography tips from taking care of the camera and housing to taking and editing pics.

Ocean Rover, January 2006, Don and Michelle Major, Toms River, NJ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, choppy. Probably the best run dive boat we've been on (over 25 live-aboards). The crew is magnificent: friendly, helpful, competent. The diving that we did