

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

around Thailand (except for Richelieu Rock) was quite mediocre. It was much better diving when were in Myanmar waters (Mergui Archipelago). There were lots of critters: harlequin shrimp, ghost pipefish, morays, snake eels, mantis shrimp, decorator crabs, seran shrimp, stone fish, lots of scorpion fish (multiple species). As for bigger fish: some leopard sharks, nurse sharks, and 4 or 5 mantas. The food was quite good, although be careful with the Thai green spicy sauce (yikes!). After a week, the food became repetitive. Hans, the head divemaster, while friendly, was preoccupied with doing his own photography, rather than leading or showing us the critters. UW Photography Comments: No E-6 processing (so much for film cameras), good to great for digital still and video. They had lots of work areas and sufficient outlets for charging cameras and such in the main salon. It might be tight if all 16 (maximum) divers were photo/video heads. Large flat screen monitor for viewing pictures from cameras (direct) or from lap tops.

Ocean Rover, February 2006, David Shem-Tov (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 5 to 30 Meters. Water: 26 to 28 Celsius, calm. One of the most comfortable and best-managed live-aboard operations. Everyone from cruise director to room attendant and in the back office is committed to making your holiday exceptional. Superbly designed and comfortable accommodations. Every detail thought of and almost every desire anticipated and catered for. The best diving was at Richelieu Rock (Thailand) and Black Rock (Myanmar.) Enjoyed 4-5 dives on most days. (BTW, on Black Rock I was given the opportunity to visit the Anggun, which was moored there at the same time. The Anggun, OR and Aqua One are

considered Thailand's top live-aboards. Shown around by friendly crew and shown several types of cabins, so I could make comparisons. Anggun more attractive on the outside, smaller and narrower - with 7-max 14 guests as opposed to OR's 8 cabins-max 16 guests. The cabins are generally comparable, with the exception of the two smallest ones and the large master bedroom. Offers blended Nitrox as opposed to membrane-filtered. Space restricted on the dive deck with limited facilities for photographers. Spoke to guests who seemed satisfied and raved about the food. I would stick with OR, but Anggun offers shorter itineraries and would be an acceptable alternative.

Ocean Rover, April 2006, Teresa Nelson (willie@theofficenet.com), Valley, WA. Experience: 475 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm and flat, choppy, surge. Good: The boat and crew - this boat is set up perfectly, especially for photographers, and the crew so anticipated your every need, that when we left and went to Wakatobi, it was hard to get used to the idea you had to remove your own wetsuit. The whole area (Andaman Sea and Similar Islands) from Richelieu Rock to Black Rock and back is suffering from overfishing; most large animals are gone. Ask anyone who works there. It's scary and sad.

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