INDIAN OCEAN AND RED SEA LIVE-ABOARDS

BURMA

Mermaid I, December 2006, David Schwab (schwabd@bunt.com), APO, AE. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 5 to 20 Meters. Water: 23 to 27 Celsius, calm. The crew was very professional, very responsive, very courteous. They treated the divers like guests in a 5-star hotel. The boat is solid and a very comfortable ride. Accommodations were good. I stayed in the cheap cabin below deck (so-so); cabins above deck have windows. Plenty of hot water; toilets could use some work. Food is good and plentiful, but tends to be repetitive. Dive staff was very safety-conscious and made every effort to ensure divers got their money's worth on every dive. The diving went from very good to absolutely fabulous! Some currents and low viz might be tough on novice divers. Highlights included a whale shark at Richelieu Rock, more stingrays than we could count on North Twin Plateau, a pair of harlequin shrimp at North Twin Pinnacle, a Spanish dancer at Western Rocky, and rescuing a poor porcupine fish stuck in a fishing net at Ahtet Kyunni. There were nudis, scorpionfish, lionfish all over the place. This boat goes from Phuket, Thailand, to Burma and back. We had dive sites all to ourselves; scheduled 4 dives per day, including night dives. PJ provides a very professional (albeit expensive) UW DVD of the trip, but worth every Baht; he can find anything 'cuz he knows where to look.

Ocean Rover, March 2007, James Jenkins (jamesallenjenkins@gmail.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 50 Feet. Water: 75 to 81 F, calm, surge. This was one of the best live-aboards – we were more pampered than anywhere else. The diving was good in general, but poor visibility significantly detracted. The weather was generally sunny) the seas were calm; however, there was a 1-meter swell which rolled the boat significantly the one time we moored in open water on a pinnacle. Underway, the boat was as steady as a cruise liner. Visibility ranged from 15' to 45' in Thai waters to 10' to 30' in Burma waters. In addition to the expected plankton (which brings the big stuff!), there was an algae bloom or red tide of some sort that took vis. down to almost nothing in some areas. Never did we see any real blue water, even in open ocean. Nearly every sort of marine life was present except for sharks such as grey reef, white- and black-tip, etc. We saw: mantas, leopard (or zebra) sharks, eagle rays, marble rays, fan-tail rays, schooling jacks, barracuda, tuna and lots of schooling reef fish. Macro subjects were plentiful including ghost pipefish, a comet fish (that actually posed!), harlequin shrimp, tiger tail seahorses, nudibranchs, huge Spanish dancers and more. Cuttlefish, scorpion fish, octopus, sea snakes, and other photogenic reef dwellers were plentiful. There was one whale shark sighting, but we didn't see it. The topography varied from typical coral reefs to rock walls and boulders. In Thai waters, we often anchored among four to six other boats! However, the crew timed things well: only on a few dives out of 35 did we find ourselves among other groups. Once in Burma, we saw the Mermaid on one site then were alone. The service was the best ever. How about having the dive crew put your fins on? The crew —

the entire crew (except the captain who watched the boat) — helped out on suiting up, boarding the inflatables, and at the end of dives. They were observant and watched for opportunities to help; e.g., the Engineer noticed that I needed help with my wetsuit and was there every time to help; after two mornings, the Steward noticed that I fixed myself a bowl of muesli and thereafter had it ready for me! We had only about six "amateur" photographers and didn't use up half the space. A full boat of photographers and videographers with full-sized rigs might get a bit crowded.

INDONESIA

Aggressor, August 2006, Ralph Baker, Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 to 81 F, choppy, currents. From July to October the winds blow through Lembeh strait and you may not be able to dive there. When the winds blow, they dive the Manado area. There is some muck there also, but nothing like Lembeh. I got 3 days in the strait. The Captain took advantage of a 3-day lull in the wind. Lembeh is a terrific place for those weird and strange critters that live in the muck. The guides were good at finding them and, unless you have done this type of diving before, you need to stick close to a guide. There are two guides for every dinghy, with four to six in a dinghy. Buoyancy is important. You swim close to the bottom and can't stir up the sand (mud); otherwise you will be unpopular. Also, you must wait your turn and give everyone a chance to see the fish. I saw rhinopias, wasp scorpion fish, devil's stingers, Pegasus fish, Mandarin fish, blue ring, long-legged and reef octopi, pigmy and regular size seahorses, sea snakes, snake blennies, pipe fish, squat lobster, harlequin shrimp and so many other things that I have no idea what they are called. The best dive is the first morning dive at 7:30 a.m. because that is before all the day boats show up from the local resorts. Also, the last afternoon dive is good because in July it is already starting to get dark at 4:30 p.m. The night dives weren't that great, except for the Manado area. Snake eels swam across the sand, and lion fish would feed in your light. For the last night/day at the dock, almost everybody took advantage of the massage at the local resort. They all raved that it was the best massage theyd had. I took the eight-hour round-trip to see the speculated tarsiers (Tincoco is the local name) at the national park on the Lembeh side of the island. That was terrific. There is a group of about seven that live in a crack in a tree. It is a short but hot and mosquito-infested hike to get there. I arrived just before dark and the tarsiers were starting to wake up. They are small and would fit in your hand. I was also surrounded by a family group of yaqi, tailless monkeys. A long day. The boat was great. However, I had room number five and it needed some maintenance. The shower had a constant drip but I just shut the bathroom door and couldn't hear it. There was a wet spot where condensation dripped on the floor. Also, storage space is adequate, but it is all under the bed with a small opening. If I had shared the room, it would have been a hassle moving luggage around. There is an Ambassador Transit Hotel in the transit lounge in Singapore. You don't have to go through customs to get to it. You rent your room in six-hour blocks of time. It is a great place to sleep in a bed and take a shower while you wait for your connecting flight.