

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 sea-horses, 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.

Archipelago Adventurer II, June 2007, Sean Bruner (sean@bruner.net), Tucson, AZ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. This boat was hands-down the best I've been on. The cabin was almost as big as a hotel room. Large king bed, a built-in writing desk and chair, large closet, separate enclosed head and shower stalls, separated by a sink area. I didn't even use the separate charging area because there was power right at the desk. There was a large living room area with flat screen TV with DVD player. Upstairs, a large dining area opened up onto a covered deck that also doubled as a second dining area, and a third deck above for sunning and watching sunsets. The food was truly gourmet, but portions which would not sink you on your next dive. The coral life and amount of fish is staggering. The program included several days diving in the south to the west and south of Misool. The viz is not particularly good here, but the soft corals are the best I've seen, better than Fiji. You'll be finning into a gentle current at a corner and see a torrent of fish sloping down the wall, but unlike other locations, the line of fish doesn't stop, it just goes on and on. The last two days were spent in the north, around Cape Kri. Here, the viz is much better, there are some large fish, including sharks and turtles, and the current is stronger. The program includes (usually) four dives a day, including a night dive. The water was so smooth and the boat was so stable that we discarded our scopolamine patches after a couple of days. The crew was professional and friendly. Both dive guides, Ali and Made, spoke excellent English and were witty, attentive, safe and able to point out interesting critters. The tender drivers were unfailingly helpful, encouraging us to pass up our tanks from the water, hand-

ing down cameras, providing water, etc. The diving was close to the ship, so if you came up early, they would take you right back, not making you wait on the others. Since the dives were somewhat deep, the 60-minute limit was satisfactory. All equipment was taken from the tenders by the crew, with the exception of mask and fins. They even washed out and hung up our wetsuits between dives. UW Photography Comments: small table for setup; air from tank on short low pressure hose; 110 and 220 current for recharging; gear handed down from tender and handed up at end of dive.

Diving4Images, Seahorse, April 2007, Michael Bode (michael@bodeweb.de), Braunschweig, Germany. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 27 to 28 C, calm. This was our second trip with Graham Abbott from Diving4Images and our third visit to Raja Ampat. The Seahorse from Sorong to Fakfak and beyond: Batantas, Misool, Pulau Pisang, Fakfak, Kaimana and Triton Bay. Graham and his Indonesian guide, Yan, were able to organize the diving efficiently, concentrating on the special needs and wishes of us uw photographers and filmers. Best diving was found around Misool and later on in the Kaimana area. There are dive sites with an incredible amount of fish and coral in all varieties. Though the Seahorse is a good and spacious ship with tasty and plenty food cooked by a good chef, there were obvious problems with the crew and the skipper and a lot of fluctuations among the crew. All the time people left and replacements could not be found. So Graham had to start training them at the beginning of every trip. Crew members were fighting among themselves. The skipper did not speak Indonesian. So he was only able to communicate with the crew

members in English, of whom some, of course, did not speak English. When we left the ship in Soron, the chef left with us. He told us he would not come back. When we arrived in the Triton Bay area, we found out that our skipper had not enough petrol on board to reach all the dive sites Graham Abbott had planned to visit. We were forced to stay in Triton Bay and could not dive all the first class dive sites of this outstanding area. With the exception of the drawbacks mentioned above, we had a good trip. I will not go again on board the Seahorse as long as the two Spanish skippers are in charge of the ship. But I will definitely join again one of Graham Abbotts next trips. UW Photography Comments: Plenty of space on a big table where UW Equipment can be set up. A dry storage room is also available. Might be crowded when the boat is full.

Grand Komodo Tours and Dives, October 2006, Dan Purnell (DanPurnell@comcast.net), Vancouver, WA.

Experience: 500+ dives. Vis: 30-100 Feet. Water: 78-84 F, calm, choppy, current. I have taken 3 trips with Grand Komodo, an Indonesian owned and operated company. The crew is outstanding, always helpful, friendly, and there when you need them. The divemasters know where and when to dive, and they find the critters. You dive 3 to 4 times a day. Grand Komodo attracts adventurous, experienced divers who love the water, and who are looking for value. Great diving and friendly people are what you get. Grand Komodo serves plentiful, great Indonesian food. You can buy a beer or a coke from the cooler. Don't expect fine red wine and gourmet dining. The quality of their diving program is excellent, and their prices are significantly below those of their competitors. Their boats are clean and well maintained. The lounge areas

have plenty of room to stretch out. The crew takes great care of your gear. The diving in Raja Ampat and Komodo is amazing. You will probably see many species that you have never seen before. The reefs are pristine. Your visibility at times will be impaired with what I call raining walls of fish.

Grand Komodo Tours, October 2006, Chrisanda Button/Rickie Sterne (rickandchris@alltel.net), Elkins, AR.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 73 to 80 F, calm, currents. Alor is visited by fewer than 1000 divers per year, but those few divers are fortunate indeed. Residents of coastal villages paddled past in their dugout canoes, sometimes stopping to sell fish to the cook. Schoolchildren waved to us as we ascended near an elementary school, and everywhere the diving was very good to downright spectacular. The Arches, the Edge, the Boardroom, and School's Out were some of the most richly covered, beautiful walls we have ever seen. A huge variety of hard and soft corals, gorgonians, and sponges vied for our attention. We swam casually past huge barrel sponges and elephant ear sponges (5 feet+) that in many destinations would have been the whole point of a dive. We did visit one site that had suffered damage from dynamite fishing past, but since a colony of two dozen large and bold Mandarin fish had taken up residence in the coral rubble, it was hard to be resentful. Before breakfast on our first day of diving we had seen a large school of huge bumphead parrotfish, blue ribbon eels, several types of scorpionfish, beautiful nudis, and assorted shrimp. When we surfaced, we found ourselves surrounded by a pod of literally hundreds of dolphins. There were masses of fish everywhere in Alor, and numerous and varied nudis, shrimp, and crabs. We

saw mantis shrimp, emperor shrimp, anemone shrimp and more. There were acres of anemones with 8 varieties of anemone fish, wobbegong shark, giant frogfish, crocodile fish, stonefish, leaf scorpionfish, sea horses, and more. Kal's Dream was a pair of current-swept pinnacles that would have justified the entire trip. As we had been advised, diving in Alor presented challenges of depth, strong currents, and upwellings and downwellings. However, the skill of our excellent dive guide, Anthony, always put us in the water at the best time and the best place. The skiff driver followed the divers very closely. The Nusa Tara is the oldest and smallest of Grand Komodo's fleet. It is a wooden pinisi. While it is a simple boat, we found it comfortable and clean. The boat can accommodate 6 divers, but only 3 were on board for our trip (thanks for running the trip, GKT&D). Our cabin in the prow had 2 lower bunks and was larger than the other 2 cabins. All cabins have private baths. While we were limited to one shower per day, and a tepid one at that, there was ample bottled water for drinking and our gear was washed by the crew at week's end. We enjoyed hanging out in the lounge with its Balinese settles. Chef Halim fed us generously and well. The food was mostly Indonesian and delicious. Steward Alwy served the meals family style and kept our cabins very clean. There was also an upper deck covered by an awning so low only I among the divers could stand upright. The dive deck had individual stations with storage baskets beneath the bench, and our wetsuits hung nearby. Anytime divers were entering the water or returning to the boat, 3 crew members stood by to assist us. They provided concierge-level service with smiles and consideration. We were taken to and from airports by

a representative of the company, and at Maumere, Anthony even bargained with Merpati Airlines to reduce our overweight baggage charges. The trip was an incredible bargain. Our only complaint was the instant coffee.

Grand Komodo Tours, April 2007, LeRoy Anderson (landersonsprint@earthlink.net), Salt Lake City, UT. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 83 F, calm, surge, currents. Grand Komodo Tours and Travel is the best live-aboard deal in Indonesia and they treat their customers well. Live-aboard conditions physically are about the same as for many of the live-aboards on the west coast of the USA that visit the Channel Islands, etc., but not up to luxury standards of, say, Aggressor/Peter Hughes boats; then again, this is not to be expected for one-third the cost. The service by the crew and divemasters was of high quality. Food and sleeping quarters were just fine. As with any tropical area, one must be prepared for changes in intestinal flora, such as bringing a week's supply of Cipro or other broad spectrum antibiotic. And the Nusa Tenggara area of Indonesia is a particularly virulent malarial zone, of which Komodo is a part, so some type of antimalarial prophylaxis is a good idea. Benadryl was helpful for our divemaster, who developed hives after a nasty encounter with fire coral. I was pleased with the diving around the Komodo Islands, especially its diversity. Being geographically centered between Australian and Asian ecosystems, as well as being on the dividing line between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Komodo is endowed with diving environments which are unique, especially in the southern areas of both Komodo and Rinca. Coming in April, I was able to dive both northern and southern areas. If you come midsummer, you

may not be able to see the southern areas, and if you come midwinter, you may not be able to see the northern areas, due to trade wind and wave action. The diving was diverse, with good pelagic activity, abundant and unique macro life, as well as fantastic coral, invertebrate, and tropical fish scenery. A fine overall dive destination in terms of seeing a lot within a relatively small area. Small camera table.

Grand Komodo Diving, August 2007, Terry Anderson (tha@tamu.edu), Bryan, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F. Leatherback Turtle Expedition, guided by Save Our Leatherback Turtles founder and director, Larry McKinna, who is a walking encyclopedia on the rare turtles. Fourteen people, and 12 days on the Grand Komodo's MS Raja Ampat, a new, comfortable dive boat in the beautiful Indonesian traditional style. Superb service, excellent food, lots of smiles — our fourth trip with this outstanding company. Owner Reno and her staff are great, and make all arrangements. I went early to visit Java and Tian made all hotel and plane reservations, all at good prices. DM Hary (and three other DMs) is outstanding, and will take divers into tiny villages to sample the culture. Two days in Leatherback area, and one night watching 4 enormous 1000-pounders, 9-footers, laying their 80 eggs, covering them up, and going back to the ocean. Local aborigine people put on a traditional turtle dance for us to bring them ashore, and then marveled at how they looked on camera. www.leatherbackturtles.org. Then 10 days diving the Raja Ampat area; only saw one other dive boat. Last time in this area, 2003, we saw 14 new species; this time 9, including sea moth, white nudibranch, black leopard wrasse, barramundi cod, and a blue-

ring octopus. All that besides the usual epaulette and wobbegong sharks, pigmy seahorses, hawksbill turtles, banded pipefish, crocodile fish, scorpion fish, stonefish, lionfish, lobsters, cuttlefish, large schools of barracudas and jacks, and 4 or 5 banded sea snakes, including one 9-footer. Reef sharks are down, so would someone please tell the Chinese to stop ordering shark fin soup.

Kararu Voyager, August 2006, John M. Damas (acesbraces@aol.com), Orland Park, IL. Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: calm and flat, choppy, strong currents, no currents. Eleven days on a luxury dive boat in Indonesian waters taking an underwater video workshop with light and motion industries. The trip was on the 150-foot Voyager run by Kararu Dive Voyages. 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. Starting by meeting us at the Bali airport and driving us to our hotel, and then a prompt pickup the next day for transportation to the boat. The Voyager is a 150-foot 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 another entire room for cameras. Three 15-foot 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 on the Voyager were spacious, clean, comfortable, and made up twice daily. The diving itself easily

matched the level of our accommodations. 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 of the Voyager. Our dive masters, Seno, Gusti and Yoman, found more fish and critters than I could possibly hope to video. They always went to great lengths to find everything requested by all of the divers. We saw frogfish, lionfish, cuttlefish, leaffish and nudibranchs galore. Throw in a few sharks, mantas pygmy seahorses and the occasional blue-ringed octopus for variety with more lush coral than I have seen anywhere. 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 always remained over the dive site and all three were in constant radio contact for the ultimate in diver safety. Food was served before, between and after the four daily dives. The chef did a wonderful job in preparing a large variety of meals on our trip. The food was always hot, tasty and plentiful. Theme dinners every night Italian, Greek, Thai, Vietnamese and Balinese. After dinner, Dan Baldocchi (Dan@lmindustries) and Michael Topolovac from Light Motion Industries (www.lmindustries.com) would screen several divers video clips from the days diving. Dans Light and Motion video and photo workshop was a fantastic experience on top of what was already a spectacular dive trip. Total cost of the 11-day trip was \$3,500, including air fare back to Bali from the end point of Bima. Sasha accompanied us to the check-in at the airport and somehow got all 16 divers gear on board without any excess charges!

Kararu Voyager, April 2007, Sue Cropper, Wyckoff, NJ. Experience:

1856 dives. Vis: 10 to 0 feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm and flat, choppy, surge, strong currents, no currents. Terrific operation for confident, experienced, level-headed divers who can deal with rapidly changing underwater conditions. The crew is helpful, friendly, well-taught and fun. The dive master and the couple in charge (Kerry and Hergen) were genuinely interested in making the guests have a good time and see as much as possible. The boat is lovely inside, roomy and comfortable and well appointed (ugly exterior) and the fish life is plentiful and friendly. Indonesia has many areas where down-drafts, whirlpools and surging currents can appear quickly as they do here and represent a real hazard to unsuspecting, not-so-experienced divers. After returning home and reflecting on the niceness of the crew and the operation, I think more instruction, more discussion and more before-the-fact awareness for the divers (and I will share that thought with the boat) is necessary. My video lights failed and Hergen set me up with a new system — which was great, and appreciated; Kerry did her best to get us to see mantas; and I had a great time by myself off-gassing at the top of a reef at 15 feet at night in a raging current (and even got video of an epaulet shark) but I know not everyone would have felt that way. Also, while breakfast was extraordinary and the names of the dishes for lunch and dinner sure were interesting, the food was not good and often not enough was prepared — and desserts were ghastly.

Kararu Dive Voyages, Cheng Ho, August 2007, Liz Hanks (lizhanks@gmail.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, calm, currents. This was a Light & Motion videography trip organized by Dan Baldocchi and

Michael Topolovac. The itinerary was ideal: 11 nights from Bima to Komodo. We flew in and out of Bima. Dan and Michael were fantastic leaders. We had video-related lectures on several days, and critique sessions in the evenings. They also let us use their FX1 and D200 rigs when they were available and some of us are now spoiled for life. The Cheng Ho is a big, beautiful wooden sail ship (although the sails only come out for photo ops). The cabins are quite large by live-aboard standards and get cleaned twice daily. Each has its own A/C unit with remote control. There is a ton of room on the boat for lounging around with a book or working on a tan. On-board masseuse, laundry service, and nightly turn-down service. The daily routine started at around 6:30 a.m. with a cold breakfast that included fresh fruit, juices, cereal, croissants, etc. The first dive was at 8 a.m. and was followed by a warm breakfast. The selections included things like pancakes, eggs, noodles, and porridge. After the second dive at 11 a.m., a lunch buffet was always ready. Then came the third dive at 3 p.m., with a sweet or savory snack afterwards. Night dives were not to be missed. Luckily they were at 6:30 p.m., instead of after dinner, so you didn't have to worry about being too tired or hammered to participate. That left dinner at around 8 p.m. Food was outstanding. Chef Steve had themes for every lunch and dinner, alternating between Eastern and Western cuisine. His creations were truly marvelous. Even the afternoon snacks and soups were delightful, and during the main meals, there were always several dishes to choose from. Dinner was served outside on the top deck when the weather cooperated. There was an honor system sheet for the adequate selection of wine, beer, and liquor. The diving is done

from two tenders that get boarded via wooden steps on the side of the ship. The steps were a little wobbly and some divers chose to have the crew load their tanks onto the tenders. Most divers geared up before boarding. The crew also loads the photo/video gear into the assigned tenders. Everybody was diving Nitrox and fills were pretty consistent at 3000 PSI and 32-33 EAN. Before many of the dives, a current check was done to see which site was the most diveable. The briefings included a hand-drawn map of the site. The divemasters (Gusti, Kerri, Hergen, and Sam) took turns showing us the incredible critters in the area that would be otherwise impossible to spot. Hergen and Kerri were also the cruise directors. They were constantly making sure that everybody was happy, that any issues with cabins were quickly resolved, etc. The sites fell into two broad categories: Muck (with spectacular critters) and current (with abundant fish life, colorful coral, and good visibility). We also had one amazing giant manta dive. On the critter side of things, we saw several types of pipefish, cuttlefish, lionfish, scorpionfish, frogfish, stonefish, octopi, eels, all kinds of nudibranchs, flat worms, crab, shrimp, and a few stargazers and pygmy seahorses. On the night dives, it seemed like there was an interesting critter every few inches. On the current dives, we saw schools of jacks, sweet lips, rainbow runners, sweepers, anthias, etc. Lots of white tip sharks on one of the dives, turtles on another, giant mantas on yet another dive. The coral was abundant, colorful, and healthy on many of the current dives. In the middle of all the diving, we went ashore a few times in search of the cute and cuddly Komodo dragon. On Rinca we ran into at least a half a dozen grown-ups (a few at the ranger station;

a few on the side of the hiking trail), as well as a water buffalo, monkeys, wild pigs, and deer. Steve Fish, the boat's resident videographer, shooting footage of us with his FX1. At the end of the trip, we watched what he had put together. Most of the divers bought his DVD. It was so much better than our own amateur footage. We all got a printout with a list of all the islands and dive sites we visited, along with the dates. That made it easy to fill any gaps in the log books. The page also included all our e-mail addresses. The crew took care of getting us to the airport, checking us in, paying for excess baggage fees (there's a limit to what they'll cover but we didn't exceed it by enough to matter), and making sure we got off to Bali safely. The Indonesian bureaucracy is gargantuan and the crew did everything they could to insulate us from it. There was noise during the crossings (bring ear plugs; it's a wooden ship and it makes noise when it's motoring), and no light above the sink in the cabins. UW Photography Comments: On the dive deck there was ample "wet" room for stashing the housings with cabinet storage underneath (bring zip-loc bags to keep stuff dry). Inside the main salon and close to the dive deck, there was a large dry charging station area with both 110V and 120V power strips. We had 10 divers and a ton of gear. It would've been crowded with a full load of 20 divers if everybody had photo/video gear. They may be adding extra space on the dive deck to accommodate more photographers. After each dive, the crew gave each housing a dunk in a dedicated camera rinse tank. There is also a superb media room with a large plasma TV for reviewing footage and a large selection of movies and books. There are also PCs with Photoshop in some cabins.

Kararu Dive Voyages, Cheng Ho, August 2007, Steven Levin, Arlington, VA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 35 to 80 Feet. Water: 75 to 79 F, calm, choppy. The boat has lots of space in the salon and in public areas. Some cabins are large but not all. The boat is advertised as a luxury boat and it is not. The all-wood structure makes it noisy. The toilet/shower area was smelly and moldy. No lighting in cabin over basins or desk. Hot water was not available most of the time. Compressors on front of boat, and when running, exhaust drifts over the entire boat. Dinghy loading area adjacent to boat's engine exhausts. Food is marginal. Hot breakfast cooked hours before served. When an item of food ran out, it was not refilled. UW Photography Comments: Charging stations inside of the main salon but that area was not suitable for camera setup or maintenance. Area adjacent to dive deck exposed to elements at all times and was defined as a "wet" area to include the cabinet storage.

Komodo Dancer, April 2007, Dr. N.W. Edwards, Ajax, Ont. Experience: 400 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 feet. Water: 78 to 86 F, strong currents. Excellent service onboard — large, enthusiastic crew made for a great atmosphere. Lots of critters — not good for big animals, but pygmy seahorses, hairy crabs, octopus, and lots of small fish. Strong currents required each dive to be assessed by crew in advance, and they record (and provide) GPS locator and sausages. Accommodations clean and spacious. Dive deck also has lots of room.

Komodo Dancer, April 2007, Elisa and Russ Berger, Carrollton, TX. All showed up bright and early to board the Dancer. Michael had requested dive master Garry Bevan, a knowledgeable, experienced Brit whose wit made the

best out of every moment of the weeks trip — good or bad — which is an art in itself. Joining him was French dive master Carin Kunz-Jacques Lenting, who was capable, but we understand is leaving the Peter Hughes operation along with husband Onno. We were greeted with glasses of iced juice and cold face towels, and our luggage was taken below for us. BCs and regs are attached to our air or Nitrox tank, where it would stay for the week (barring problems). Tanks are stored along the bow of the boat and filled between dives, then returned to either the Black or Red boat for dives, depending on which one you and your buddy sign up for the first day. Other gear is stored with your buddies in one of 8 large crates below the deck seats. Its with mixed emotions that you meet your fellow boat mates, wondering whether you'll meet new buddies for life, or water hazards to avoid in future charters. The other rooms were filled with great divers: a couple celebrating their 25th (Chris and Fiona); travel agent Kate from the U.K.; Angelo from Chicago, heading back to the States from work in South Korea; and Katrine, a medical pharmacologist from Massachusetts. The dive deck is spacious, shaded with a canvas tarp and ringed with seating. The large, central table includes plexiglas windows with below-decks emergency egress and wooden dining/briefing chairs. The camera tables are tucked against the salon wall with ample storage cabinets below to protect the largest photo rig. Fresh water tanks for cameras and dive computers are secured away from those for other dive gear and refilled daily. Two warm water showers with soap and shampoo allow one to clean above decks after each dive day. Wetsuit tanks have deodorizing additives and suits are

hung in the sun between dives to dry. Below-deck rooms had either bunk singles or a double bed (forward), with ample storage. There are two larger suites above deck behind the pilot room. Bathrooms had a sink, a standard toilet and shower with a removable shower head. We never ran out of hot water. Individual a/c units poured as much cold as you desire onto your sleeping head. Beds had reading lights and a porthole allowed you to check the weather (although ours leaked a bit on the stormy crossing between Lombok and Bali). Since this was about a 15-year-old wooden vessel and we were coming out of rainy season, it was hard to get dry after a shower without going up and seeking a breeze. Carin tried to keep the forward hatch open to allow air circulation, but crew kept closing it to keep ambulatory divers from falling into the engine room. Before the pilot room is another smaller, partly shaded deck with lounge chairs. Underneath are the air-conditioned salon and the kitchen. The salon tables were covered with computers, dive logs, novels and drinks most of the week. Only twice did we eat there during a short rainfall. Otherwise we ate out on the spacious deck table on Indonesian batik tablecloths and woven mats with flowers and Komodo dragons looking on. In the middle of the salon waits a lender library of paperbacks and a full selection of marine reference books. One end of the wall has a huge plasma TV screen and shelves full of Asian pirated DVD movies and power strips with every type of power converter and battery charger. Also in the salon is the snack and drink bar, a water cooler and fridge full of wine, beer, sodas, fruit juice and milk for the taking, all included. You are made personally responsible for your safe alcohol

consumption while diving. After the last dive, the competent steward, Sebastian, comes around and asks if he can make you something. He makes a mean mojito, margarita or hot coffee or tea with Baileys. There are always peanuts and almond cookies available; fresh Indonesian baked goodies come out of the oven after each dive — homemade donuts, fried samosas filled with cheese or raisins, fried plantains. Kiwi Viv brought a pallet of Tim Tams to share after every dive. Our Javanese chef was remarkable. Breakfast was any kind of egg, artisan bread or fresh croissants, cereal or muesli, yogurt, waffles or pancakes, bacon or sausage and a selection of fruit. Lunches and dinners were sit-down hot meals that always included fruit (passion fruit, snake fruit, mangosteen, apple, banana, melon, papaya and pineapple) and salads; dinners included soup, dessert and wine or beer. Vegetarian or restricted diets were accommodated. I had emailed my long list of allergy no-nos and the chef made sure that my lamb, chicken, beef, fish, salads, rice, pasta and desserts were safe for me to eat. The dishes were varied and delicious — coconut shrimp, curry, beef spaghetti with garlic toast, coleslaw, fried rice, shrimp salad, wheat noodle salad, fried chicken and tenderloin (er, tender-lion) with home fries, lamb stew; the last night was a multi-course Indonesian buffet suitable for 4-star hotel dining. Hot sauce, soy and kecap were always available. Anniversaries and birthdays called for cake with candles and serenading. It was humorous and sweet. Day 2: Three dives off Satonda, a volcanic island complete with crater lake Magic Rock, Entrance to Lake Bay, Batu Gerandong. Huge green eel, herd of large cuttlefish, ribbon eel, bulldozer shrimp keeping

house for their goby roommate; pygmy seahorse, banded pipefish, ornate ghost pipefish, a variety of nudibranch, soft coral of every color and countless anemone with their dancing clownfish maitre ds. Two crinoids tried to hitch a ride on me. After sunset when the fruit bats poured by the thousands from the caves to feed. Day 3: Motored overnight further east along the Sumbawa coastline to Gili Bantus K2. Sightings: Black Boat 7 spotted a mola mola in the water en route to the site. A K2, we spotted glassfish, leaf fish, stonefish, pipefish, robust ghostfish, shrimp, lionfish, trumpetfish, clownfish, giant clam, orangutan crab in anemone, octopus, puffers, flatworms and nudibranch and unbelievable gardens of soft and hard corals. Motored further east to the ill-fated GPS Point attempt. When our Black Boat 7 got to 60 feet, it was a flash before we were swept to 100, some down to 139, before clawing into the reef and crawling hand over hand against the current back into safe water. All in all, the dive was 26 minutes of heavy breathing, headaches, bleeding hands and safety stop. On the Red Boat 7, Garry had called the dive in the first 5 minutes. Dive three: motored finally into Komodo waters to Coral Gardens, Batu Mancho. Sightings: frog fish, pipefish, lionfish, leaf scrollfin, large humphead parrotfish. The site is sand with low vis and many large bommies. Day 4: We awoken to the news that our engine has blown one of its head gaskets during the nights hard drive. They have called an engineer to fly in from Bali to Flores, who will join us the following day to disassemble and repair our ability to motor home again. We will not be traveling to the more southern dive sites in the Komodo Marine Sanctuary, but instead will dive a few days on the sites that can be

reached by short motoring and then by tender. We begin at 7 a.m. by visiting the Komodo National Park for a few hours. A steamy jungle treat, led by a native Komodian (?) who tapped his large stick on the ground and told us the Komodo Dragons run faster than a person. You only need to be faster than someone else in your party. We stood close-up and captured the virulent drool, the white, calcium-rich poop (they eat bones and all), and the huge claw of this largest prehistoric ora on camera and watched as it ripped putrefied flesh from the goat carcass left dangling for it from the tree. And people ask us if we were afraid of diving near shark! Verdant jungle of huge palm, cockatoo, dove, butterflies, snakes, lizards, wild boar, deer (seen on the beach, but hidden here), vines and banyan. We motor an hour north to Padar Island. Pods of spinner dolphin feed in the nutrient-rich water that surrounds our boat in Komodo Marine Park. Padar Pillarsteen (stone pillar). Sightings: We drop down a lava extrusion construct wall with surge to about 70 feet, then work our way around large swimthroughs and columns. We see turtles, rays, a small reef shark, huge angels, puffers, and a scorpionfish with an orange moustache. The sponge here are huge and varied. Large snappers worked through a fishball of fry. West Reef, Padar. Sightings: There are lionfish, robust cucumbers, oriental sweetlips and yes, more nudibranch. Beautiful color on this site! The sponges and tunicates make the reef into a huge, watery Fauvist masterpiece. At 5 p.m. some of us travel by tender to disembark on Padar, walk over the tip of the island and onto Pink Beach at sunset. The air is fragrant from flowering trees. Night dive at Garrys Apology. Sightings: Some

took Garry up on his offer of investigating a new site that has always looked promising. While kidding him about how bad it was afterward, they still managed to find anemone crab, upside-down jellyfish, lionfish, basketstars, Moorish idols (asleep, covered in green), and crinoid shrimp. Dive Day 5: Tatawa Besar Island. Current City. Sightings: This is a 45-degree slope down to 75 feet. Manta country. We saw at least 5 unique individual mantas, a large turtle, baby lionfish, juvenile snapper (black and white striped), crinoid shrimp, filefish and yes, nudibranch. Dive two: Manta cleaning station at Mauan. Sightings: Another gentle, sandy slope, this site had a few coral table formations that had become a favorite bathhouse for our favorite winged sea creature. Most of us hunkered down in the rocks and watched as they swirled by, then moved about 20 feet over to hunker down and watch another group of bathers. Gili Lawah Laut. Sightings: Going down to about 60 feet, we let a gentle current take us slowly up toward the shoreline through a wonderland of sand and hard corals, including some of the largest plate corals I've ever seen. We see turtle, several kinds of lionfish, spotted garden eel, shark, rays, a large batfish, anemonefish, goby and the largest nudibranch we've seen so far this trip. Gili Lawah Laut. The site was so phenomenal that they returned that night. Someone spotted an alligator fish. Dive Day 6: Castle Rock. Sightings: This is a large, gently sloping submerged pinnacle — just barely. At low tide it almost reaches sea level. At the end of the dive, Garry took off his tank and stood on the top of the rocky structure for a prize photo. Our favorite dive? It started off with a banded black and white sea krait, then a textile eel, ribbon eel, white-tip shark,

blue-spot fantail ray, trumpetfish, octopus, and so many lionfish that you had to be careful where you were (in relation to them) at all times. Oh, and rough flutemouths, tan and white lumpy starfish, necklace seastars, pin cushion seastars. There were so many large crown of thorns that we later started devising a way to get natives to begin collecting them. This site is psychedelic soft coral that we decided we could live on dreams of it for the rest of our years (if we had to). A mother white-tip shark swam around keeping watch over her two babies that were napping under a coral shelf. We spotted Moorish idols, surgeon fish, scorpionfish, trumpets, black lionfish, crab, unicorn fish, smooth flutemouth, a large octopus. Black anemone fish nestled in green anemone. Crabs, wart slugs, large cowries, and giant clams were numerous. Soft corals were multi-colored and gorgeous, but the hard plate coral was the star here. I never did see the watcher wrasse listed on the dive briefing board. When we got back, we learned that the engineer and crew had worked through the night and successfully fixed the motor! Dive Day 7: Satonda, Sumbawa. Final dive: Tanjung Brenti. Sightings: We are running late getting back to port (which only the crew seemed worried about, not us). We have to cancel one dive today, so we make this one a great one. This is a gentle, sandy muck dive along the sandy shoreline — where the nurseries are tended. We see little coral heads in the muddy sand full of juveniles. One has multiple ghost pipefish, another a broad-banded pipefish, another 5 lionfish, and another at 53 feet has a large smashing mantis shrimp. There are tiny creatures inhabiting the coral wall that starts 40 feet down the beach: yellowtail blenny,

octopus, banded pipefish, an unidentifiable light-colored, long-armed shrimp. While we all rinsed, dried and packed up gear, Garry and Carin worked on finishing their Official Souvenir Trip DVD. They had asked each photographer to render up their best 10 shots to include in the disk. We gathered in the salon to view the final product — good show! It included excellent footage Garry and Onno had taken on previous Komodo dives, times when visibility was better than we have experienced this week. Tonights dinner was the full-spread Indonesian buffet and we stuffed, drank and laughed over our truths and tall tales.

Komodo Dancer, July 2007, Helen Malnar (helenpm1@verizon.net), Tampa, FL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 72 to 82 F, calm, surge, currents. Met the boat in Bali and sailed (with sails up) and motored toward the Komodo National Park. From start to finish the diving was superb. Our cruise director, Garry, was topnotch and made sure we got to the best sites, all the while keeping in mind that 11 out of 14 of us were photographers. Currents were at a minimum, which made for good photo ops. This area might have less wind earlier in the year, but for July, we made most of the dive sites. We did the 11-night trip. The nitrox compressor blew midway, but Garry arranged to borrow one and we were up and running with nitrox again shortly thereafter. Really great crew! Food lacked variety; I have had way better meals on other live-aboards. But the lionfish, cuttlefish, ghost pipefish, etc., made the trip worthwhile for me.

Komodo Dancer, July 2007, Rene Umberger (octopus@maui.net), Kihei, HI. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 68 to 82 F, calm,

currents. The best diving I've seen so far for colors, diversity and abundance. Don't miss Cannibal Rock and Yellow Wall — sites that are sometimes too rough to get to in the summer — the beauty of these sites left most of the group either speechless, weeping or babbling! Other highlights were the day of muck diving, the mantas at the Alley, GPS Point, K2 and diving Hot Rocks on an active volcano where gas bubbles escaped through the warm sand throughout the dive site! Due to the abundant and fragile invertebrates covering almost everything on the bottom, perfect buoyancy control is a must. Wayan was a brilliant and gentle critter finder; Gillian and Michael were good, too, though Michael was sometimes more interested in taking his own photos. Gary, cruise director, comedian and jack of all trades, was an expert in every area. When the nitrox compressor exploded on board, damaging the other compressor as well, he saved the trip by finding one to rent on a nearby island. Sebastian, chief steward, gave first class service and treated every passenger like a welcomed, honored guest. When Sebastian had to leave the charter due to a family emergency, Pancha took over with a great smile, doing a good job of filling some tough shoes. With the exception of the panga drivers, who were in need of some training, the entire staff was outstanding and a major contribution to a fantastic dive trip. However, there was real room for improvement in handling a diver whose complete lack of buoyancy control not only created personal danger, but caused much reef damage and angst for anyone nearby. This person's lack of skill was identified on the mandatory checkout dive on the first diving day, yet nothing was done about it until halfway into the trip when daily

customer complaints became demands and the dive staff finally assigned this person a private guide, whose job was to hold the diver off the reef via a bcd strap. The vessel had some maintenance problems with the compressors; toilets kept breaking; and the upper deck leaked onto our bed for 3 days before it was fixed. Because it's a wooden monohull, there were many sleepless nights due to intense rocking and creaking during the rough nighttime crossings — not to mention the leaking porthole! While the salon was clean and nice, the cabins and showers were in need of attention — hard to believe the boat is only 6 years old. Exploding compressor could have been a major disaster, but fortunately happened when the tanks were still near empty. Much more attention needs to be paid to maintenance — the vessel quality did not match the quality of the service. Puri Santrian before and after the trip was OK, but be warned about the restaurants outside the hotel — food poisoning from a beachfront restaurant just next door made me almost miss my plane home.

Komodo Dancer, September 2007,
Rick Troberman (tmanlaw@aol.com),
Seattle, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives.
Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 to 82
F, calm, currents. The weather was
perfect the entire 11 days. The boat (a
125-foot wooden schooner) was great
and the food and service were superb
(a crew of 15 for 14 divers). The wind,
weather, and currents all cooperated,
which allowed us to hit all the best dive
sites, including Crystal Rock, Castle
Rock, Hot Rocks, Yellow Wall, Batu
Balong at Current City, and Seraya
Beach. This was made possible because
of the crew's willingness to change the
schedule around the currents, which
can be ripping, making some sites

inaccessible at times. Indonesia offers a great variety of diving (reefs, rocks, walls, and muck diving), all of which were amazing. Some of the highlights included a mimic octopus; wonderpus; stargazers; sea moths; ornate ghost pipe fish (many); pigmy seahorses; regular seahorses; sea snakes; crocodile fish (several); a blue ribbon eel that came all the way out of its hole (and was nearly five feet long); and more nudibranchs and strange bottom dwellers than I could possibly name. Sadly, there were not a lot of sharks (an ominous trend almost everywhere). The boat cruises from Bali to Komodo National Park, and includes a land tour at the park to view the dragons. We also did several other great land excursions. Komodo Dancer offers both 7- and 11-day trips. Get there at least a few days before, and spend a few days touring Bali. The Puri Santrian Sanur Beach Resort (arranged by Peter Hughes) was reasonably priced and nice place to stay.

MV Tarata, May 2007, Mel Cundiff (Cundiff@Colorado.edu), Boulder, CO. Experience: 1700+ dives. Vis: 30 to 70 feet. MV Tarata is a 79-foot Indonesian Bugis-style wooden live-aboard with a 17-foot beam and six cabins for 12 divers below deck. The cabins are of moderate size and have AC and ensuite bathrooms/showers with ample hot water. The two dive masters, Sebastian and Johnny, among the 11-person Indonesian crew, could speak good English and were helpful in locating fish and critters for us. The main deck housed the mess hall; galley; a public bathroom/shower; a dive deck with a camera table, gear storage baskets and two compressors; and a large bow area with FW rinse tanks for cameras, etc. Four steps down from the dive deck was the dive platform for giant stride entries or, more often, loading into

and out of the large Zodiac used as a dive tender. An additional hot water shower was located here. One full wall cabinet in the mess hall was used as a charging area for cameras and lights with both 220V and 110V availability, and the cabinet contained a library of fish/critter ID books. The dining area had a small TV monitor for showing images and videos shot during our dives. No Nitrox was available. The sun deck which was half covered by an awning and had padded benches and deck chairs, the bridge and captains and crew quarters and the crew mess/lounging area. Dives were regularly scheduled at 7 and 11 am and 3 and 7 pm, with meals being served after the dives. Moving between dive sites never interfered with our dive schedules, and the only dives we missed during the 10 days were to take the Komodo National Park tour and because a high-pressure compressor hose blew and had to be replaced. On the standard ranger-led Komodo NP excursion we saw four large dragons, a poisonous yellow-bellied tree viper and several tropical birds. Each night and many times during the day we were anchored or moored in calm, quiet, protected harbors. Snorkeled to the shallow fringing reefs near shore, beachcombed or climbed the hill tops for the view. The Zodiac was also commonly used for shore excursions. On one occasion on Rinca Island, a Komodo dragon was prowling the beach and divers approached cautiously. Close by were about a dozen monkeys playing on the beach. The shallow fringing reefs showed significant anchor damage from both large and small boats. Most sites where we stayed had permanent moorings in place. We had calm seas except for one rain storm while we slept and one afternoon storm confining us to the mess hall. The ships configura-

tion did not allow easy access from one area to another without going outside — a minor inconvenience in a storm. We encountered a half-dozen other dive boats but found no interference with their divers. The buffet-style meals were tasty and plentiful. They were mostly rice-based Asian dishes accompanied with fresh fish, shrimp, chicken, pork, beef or tofu. There were always mixed vegetables and a fresh salad of lettuce, tomatoes and green, yellow and red sliced sweet peppers. There were either prepared desserts or assorted fruits. Snacks and banana smoothies were served between our 3 and 7 pm dives and hot coffee, tea bags and powdered Tang were always available with both hot and cold water. Cold soft drinks and beer were available for an added cost. It would have been helpful to have bulk quantities of a light, mixed drink such as lemonade or an orange drink to help keep us hydrated. Before our 7 am dive, cereal, toast and drinks were available, and after the dive a mostly American hot breakfast with scrambled eggs, bacon, etc., was served. We had only a couple of dives with a strong to moderate — but manageable — current. The zodiac tender was always close by when we surfaced, and the Dive Alerts and safety sausages we all carried were never used. In the northern part of the greater Komodo area the water temperature averaged 83 F (28.3 C), but in the south of Rinca Island bordering on the Indian Ocean the temperature was a much brisker 77.8 F (25.4 C). The average overall visibility was 52 feet (16 m). For biologicals, how does a whale shark, a rhinopias, an inimicus and 15 Spanish dancers sound? I have done both land-based and live-aboard diving in Raja Ampat and must yield to Dr. Gerald Allen and colleagues that RA has the greatest diversity of

marine organisms found anywhere in the world. But the diversity in so many other areas of Indonesia is so great that we generic divers have a hard time telling the difference. Among the 12 divers on this trip, 6 have an accumulated total of over 40 weeks of diving experience in the western tropical Pacific, and our whole group is unanimous in stating that this trip provided the most enjoyable mix of small and large fish, critters and big pelagics of any other area we have ever dived. The reefs were dominated by hard and soft corals interspersed with huge numbers of feather stars and tunicates. Most dives had bulldozer shrimps and gobies, nudibranchs, anemones and clowns, vermetid snails and cushion stars with symbiotic shrimps. The night dives brought out hundreds of huge basket stars and about 15 Spanish dancers. The 24-foot whale shark appearing on our last dive and swimming among us was a high point. We saw a 10-foot eagle ray; about 20 sharks, one each black-tip and nurse and the rest white tips; Napoleon wrasses; bumphead parrots; huge brown sweetlips; a world-class 8-foot barracuda; lots of tunas, mackerel and trevallys; about 15 hawksbills, greens and Ridleys turtles; and 9-12 cuttlefish, over half of which had an 8-inch or greater diameter. Among other notable sightings were a lavender weedy scorpionfish; a devil scorpionfish; 5 juvenile pinnate batfish; 7 frogfish (with 5 being 14 inches long); two 9-10 inch diameter ornately colored stonefish; a leaf scorpionfish; pygmy seahorses; about 7 blue ribbon eels, clownfish on coralliomorphs; about 6 orangutan crabs and a sea spider. Among the many nudibranchs and flatworms, there were 8 species of nudibranchs and 2 of flatworms I hadnt seen before.

Odyssea I, February 2007, Mel McCombie (mmccombie@aol.com), New Haven, CT. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 10 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, currents. The *Odyssea I* live-aboard is still getting a few kinks out, but we really liked the trip. The cabins are the big and comfortable (big enough that I could do Pilates on the cabin floor!), and the beds extraordinarily comfortable. Each cabin comes with shower robes and ensuite bathrooms with showers. We berthed in the lower deck stateroom in the bow, and though dark, found it pleasant. There is an analogous stateroom on the main deck with large windows, but its proximity to the saloon can make it noisy. The standard cabins were nice, slightly smaller than the staterooms, but everyone reported plenty of storage and comfortable beds. The food started out bland, but owing to the presence of a group of Thai divers who helped with the cooking, it got better. Most of the meat in the dishes was gristly and fatty, though chicken, fish, and shellfish were fine. The food is served buffet-style and the dining area large. We weren't bowled over by the quality of the cooking, but neither did we starve. The dive operation is also working out its snags (several of the DMs are new to live-aboards and more cavalier in their attitudes toward dive safety than we wished); the dive deck is crowded, but since the crew sets up your gear, washes it after every dive, and takes care of any mechanical problems, the small size was okay; the only time we wished for more space was when suiting up. The stairs down from the dive deck to the boat were narrow enough that divers who shop at the Big and Tall will have to go down sideways and gear up below. The crew was kind, attentive, and helpful, and we bless them for wash-

ing wetsuits after every dive in a tank with a mild disinfectant! The result was none of that wetsuit funky smell (you know what I mean) that tends to hang like a blue cloud after the 2nd day, and indeed, my wetsuit smelled better at the end of the trip than the start. The crew also washes and dries your gear at the end of the trip. Diving is from rigid-bottomed inflatables, backroll entries; the currents were often strong enough to make our regs cavitate, and vis was often low. Dives are usually one hour, though some wheedling on our part upped the dive times ten minutes or so. The conditions in these islands are so varied, as is the life, that it can't be easily categorized. Some dives are big animal dives (an unforgettable fleet of mantas); some are muck; some are coral; some are critter. The most gratifying animal we saw regularly was the wobbegong shark, seen on about every 3rd dive. The conditions are too challenging for divers without experience in high current and low vis, but for experienced divers, they are perfectly manageable. Easily the most comfortable and uncrowded live-aboard we've ever experienced (save its dive deck). Its top deck is enormous and houses a digital room, media room, large shaded area, and large sundeck. However, the effort of getting to and from Irian Jaya (Papua) may not be worth it to some given that with a few exceptions, you can see all the creatures in the Raja Ampats in more easily accessed areas in Indonesia. Yet preserving the marine life in the area is important, so supporting the positive power of tourism makes a difference. It is certainly worth a visit. Bring local money for overweight baggage fees and airport taxes. FYI, since the only flights to Sorong go through Manado, it's easy to piggyback a week or two in Lembeh and/or Bunaken onto your trip (if you've got time and some

spare change). I booked through Marty Dawson of Scuba Travel Ventures, who is both efficient and extremely caring. UW Photography Comments: dedicated digital room on the top deck; dedicated towels and tanks; crowded on the dive deck.

Ondina, Deb Fugitt Charter, November 2006, Peter J Maerz (pjmaerz@yahoo.com), Hollywood, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, currents. Fantastic customer service from Deb Fugitt (debf@cityseahorse.com), who was in constant communication and helped to plan every leg of our individual journeys. As Deb suggested, I carefully packed camera gear in home-made high-density foam-lined cases that made it easy for TSA to unpack and repack. No damage or concerns there. Also at Deb's suggestion, I politely but firmly insisted on checking my bags all the way through to Manado from my embarkation point in Ft. Lauderdale. But my bags showed up on schedule almost three days later. I kept my two bags just under 40 lbs. There was only one nominal overage charge, from Manado to Sorong. The Ondina, an all-wooden Pinsi-style schooner, was designed from scratch for divers. Cabins were cleverly designed to provide plenty of storage, lighting, and overall comfort. Ensuite heads feature a fairly large vanity/sink, a shower and a hand-pumped marine head. While not "deluxe" by 5-star resort standards, the accommodations were very appealing with lots of hand-made touches. The enclosed dive prep room provided more than enough room to gear up in comfort without slugging fellow divers. In typical live-aboard fashion, each of us was assigned a space and tank on a bench with personal storage in a basket underneath. A separate room housed

wetsuits, a large rinse tank and two very efficient tankless hot water shower units. A fairly spacious salon housed two large, heavy wooden tables with continuous booths surrounding them and large chairs in the space between them. As usual, this was the social center for dining, laptop editing, movie watching etc. The food was healthy, wholesome and delicious, often surprising (such as soups for breakfast that were delicious and fit perfectly with the first meal of the day). A large, partially shaded sundeck topped the ship. The diving op: Extensive and entertaining briefings took place in the prep room. We were permanently assigned one of four "tinnies" (tenders), two "red" and "blue" on each side of the mother ship. Red 1 and Blue 1 alternated boarding with Red 2 and Blue 2 each day. Short rides to the sites culminated with the divemaster and tender driver helping us gear up, a coordinated back-roll, quick swim back to the tinny and then a headlong bolt to the bottom to avoid being swept over the top of the reef by currents. Some sites did have plenty of push, but there were a good many that were easily manageable or calm. Coral gardens at a number of sites, most notably Melissa's Garden, stretched to the horizon, absolutely brimming with every size, texture and type of coral, all of it pristine. Critters abounded, from orangutan shrimp to Coleman shrimp to wire coral crabs to zebra crabs to every size, shape and color of nudibranch imaginable. Clouds of anthias infested fields of elkhorn corals. Huge, glittering balls of silver-sides flitted in unison. Dance troupes of Moorish Idols, glowing coral trout, and entire chapters of ID books worth of butterfly and angel fish. Brilliantly striped and polka-dotted sweetlips in tight packs. Otherworldly wobbecong

sharks. Bumpheads in battalions, stoically facing the onrushing current. The photo facilities were excellent. The area is quite lovely, with many lush, uninhabited rock islands dotting the horizon and typically gorgeous Pacific sunsets. Easily on a par with, if not a cut above PNG and the Solomons. UW Photography Comments: Sturdy, lighted, mostly protected camera table with thick, perforated rubber mats. Storage underneath for personal plastic baskets. Two dedicated, rubber-lined rinse tanks. Crew very knowledgeable about and careful with cameras.

Pelagian, October 2006, James Jenkins, San Francisco, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, calm. The water was colder than advertised — be prepared for thermoclines of 75° or lower with average temps in the 78°-79° range; the Zodiacs were cramped for 6 or even 5 divers. The reasons were all very positive: 1) On many chase boats, you put your weights and tank on aboard the main vessel, then awkwardly board the Zodiac. The Pelagian's inflatables have a tank rack. The pilot and dive master help you on with your tank just before entering the water. This saves on back pain and is generally much safer; 2). These Zodiacs had a pilot console in front; this gives the pilot more control and better vision for pickups. The Zodiacs had twin engines — faster and safer; 3) The ladder was fixed to the floor. Entries were easy, even with tanks on. The reefs were pristine, healthy and full of small life. Wide-angle opportunities abounded with soft corals, huge barrel and vase sponges, fans, whip coral, black coral trees and more. The macro subjects at Buton Bay rivaled Lembeh. We saw only a few reef sharks; some guests saw a couple eagle rays and mobula rays. We did see some large

tuna, turtles, bumphead parrot fish, Napoleon wrasse, and a small school of jacks. Here's a list of critters from just a few dives at Buton Bay: false stone fish, stone fish, lots of scorpion fish, crocodile fish and lion fish, leaf scorpion fish, various pipefish including winged, scores of different nudibranchs and flatworms, jaw fish, razor fish, juvenile sweetlips, Mandarin fish, long-arm octopus, various eels including, dragonets, frog fish, robust ghost pipefish, ornate ghost pipefish, squid, large octopus. Diving was only from the inflatables and was limited to a maximum of 4 dives per day (2 morning, 1 afternoon and 1 dusk or night dive). You could not dive from the ship and could only dive the organized schedule. However, this made for a relaxed, unhurried schedule with time for sunning, cameras, chats, and naps. Marco and Sissy (the dive masters) were excellent! The camera room is a bit small — fine for about 4 or 5 photographers or videographers. The inclusion of Buton in the itinerary provided critter sightings rivaling Lembeh Strait; wide-angle reef scenes were among the best although the visibility was not the best I've seen. Only the absence of pelagics reduces the rating.

Pelagian, October 2006, Linda and Ron Welf, Montara, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm. Our 11-day trip off southeast Sulawesi was the ultimate in comfort and serenity. The boat is beautiful and our super deluxe" cabin was spacious. Meals are individually served to order, not a buffet. Seas were calm and the weather was sunny every day. The diving feature remote coral reefs that displayed the greatest profusion of color that we have ever seen. We dove on submerged coral atolls that were out of sight of any land or boats. Reefs were

in truly pristine condition. Most of the fish were small to medium, and there were almost no sharks or rays. Off the island of Buton there is muck diving, where we saw cockatoo waspfish, devil scorpionfish, robust and ornate ghost pipefish, Mandarin fish, orangutan crab in bubble coral, frog fish, banded cardinal fish, large plerobranchus, mantis shrimp, snake eels, and my first view of a wonderpus. The dive guides, a young Italian couple, Cici and Marco, were competent, energetic and exuded joie de vivre. They laughed easily and were fluent in English, German and Italian and kept the diving organized and on schedule. Eleven guests were divided into two groups, each with a guide. Cici was conscientious and, while petite, did just as much as a man would do in this position. Affable Marco took advantage of the indoor/outdoor speaker system to pipe a constantly changing selection of music throughout the boat, ranging from light instrumentals morning and evening to more varied music in the afternoon. The other divers were experienced divers and adventurous travelers. We had two Germans, two Swedes, one Italian and six Americans.

Pelagian, November 2006, Michael N. Hofman (mhofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. Our trip was simply wonderful, and the crew (both on land and on the boat) were perfect. Sissy and Marco, the cruise directors and dive leaders, were thoughtful, intelligent, fun and experienced. BCs and tanks stay in the two chase boats and the crew filled them with loose hoses (makes so much sense). Nitrox available along with different size tanks. Either long or short dives were fine — those who finished early either waited in the chase boat or got

a ride back to the Pelagian. Diving was interesting, especially the muck diving around Bintun. Ask to stay there longer — one pier had so much going on — Mandarin fish, mating octopus (different species). too many moray eels — all in about 8 feet! Travel logistics continue to be excellent with the Wakatobi crew and the chartered airplane to the Wakatobi airstrip. My only complaint was the long island ice tea the bartenders made the night before we left (dinner on shore at Wakatobi resort) was too strong! Gee, life's tough. UW Photography Comments: Great dedicated room had plenty of storage, electrical outlets, clean towels and also plenty of expertise to solve problems.

Pelagian, March 2007, Daniel O. Benson (DrB@DrBensonandSmith.com), Klamath Falls, OR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, currents. The rainy season was ending and the hills were a spectacular green. The little rain we encountered did nothing to spoil our dives. Wakatobi has been rumored to be run by “enviro-Nazis” so I was pleasantly surprised by the more pragmatic attitude of the Pelagian staff. (Don't misunderstand — trashing the environment was not allowed, but they weren't overbearing about it). Cabins 4 and 6 are small. Cabins 3 and 5 have room for 3 comfortably. Cabin 2 is spacious, as is cabin 1. The electric generator is up front, so cabin 2 is quietest. Fresh cookies or bread and hot towels awaited us after every dive. Bring ear drops. I missed two days of diving from an external ear infection. The great staff may be willing to launder your clothes. UW Photography Comments: There was a shortage of charging outlets, but we soon sorted that out once we realized that our chargers worked on 220V,

which was supplied in our room.

Pelagian, September 2007, Bob and Doris Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net), Fallbrook, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, calm, currents, no currents. Pelagian carries only 12 divers and cruises the waters in vicinity of southern Sulawesi; 2 divemasters and the entire crew are excellent and attentive. All diving is from tenders and personal gear doesn't leave the tenders for the duration of the trip. The crew went out of their way to make our diving convenient and comfortable. Beautiful, healthy reefs and walls and lots of drift diving, but not much in the way of large pelagics (having read about the area beforehand, we were not expecting large pelagics). They did a couple days of muck diving. Cabins are clean and comfortable, with plenty of storage space and good-sized bathrooms. Meals are served (no buffets) and the food is outstanding. Two weeks before we arrived, we read the Undercurrent review, which gave us pause; however, our experience confirmed our opinion that the Undercurrent reviewer was just cranky. The only thing the reviewer got right is that the drinks are overpriced, but considering the remoteness of the operation, that is understandable. This was our 33rd live-aboard trip and it rates among the top 5! UW Photography Comments: The photography room is dry with good lighting, ample charging stations and adequate counter space and shelves; a generous supply of drying towels was always available.

Pindito, February 2007, Linda Gettman. Took the Pindito to Raja Ampat. The boat ran into an island at 5 a.m. just as they were leaving our anchoring spot for the night. The Pindito's owner, Eddie, seemed OK when we boarded,

then we discovered that the AC in our cabin didn't work, they didn't seem too concerned about getting it fixed until I made such a fuss that they finally went into town and bought a new unit before we set off the next morning from Sorong. The AC ended up not working more than about 8 hours the entire trip — we were miserable, to say the least. The diving was mediocre, the food was marginal, mostly rice, every meal. I actually lost weight. Then, the grounding. Luckily we didn't have to abandon ship. No hole in the bottom, they hit high on the bow, damaging the bowsprit and front mast and knocking the bow cabin divers right out of their bunks onto the floor. Eddie didn't want to contact anyone and tell them the boat was damaged — he insisted they would get it fixed and we would continue on — this happened on day 7 of a 10-day cruise. We all said no way, call someone and have them come and get us; he refused. Finally several divers had sat. phones and started calling. Then Eddie did call the Indonesian coast guard, if there is such a thing, and a rescue boat came at about 6 p.m. that night. We spent the day packing up all our gear and cameras and were loaded onto the large steel-hulled boat for the 5-hour ride back to Sorong. Very long, hot, noisy trip, during which we stopped around 10 p.m. and tied up to an oil rig in the middle of the ocean for the night! We got into Sorong the next morning around 7 a.m., Steve Frink got day rooms for us at a local hotel, made flight arrangements back to Bali, and we had a chance to shower and change, then fly back to Bali, arriving late that day. A great amount of haggling went on to get us some sort of refund for the days we missed, and we ended up with \$800 per person refund after about two months. Rich and I were able to change

our flight home and came home the next day. Some stayed on in Bali and dove a couple days and came home on their regular departure schedule. Steve Frink and his wife, Barb, in Florida, did what they could to make the return happen, but the boat isn't comfortable at all, it's not set up very well for diving, the food is so-so, and we only had a couple good dives, the rest were average with average viz — not what everyone was expecting after all the hype that has been printed about that area.

MALAYSIA

M/V Celebes Explorer, July 2007, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. The Celebes is 100 feet long and 24 feet wide. It has 2 cabins on the main deck and 6 below deck for up to 18 divers. The most we had was 12, so I did not have to share a cabin. The cabins were surprisingly spacious. Each with its own private bath, shower and individually controlled air-conditioning. All meals are buffet-style, with plenty to eat. If you want something special, just ask the cook and he will try to make it for you. Beer is available. The Celebes does 4 days at Sipadan, 1 at Siamil, 1 at Kapalai and 1 at Mabul islands. Sipadan is by far the best diving, but the other islands have some good points. You could see 50 feet but not take any pictures. Only up close to the reef was the visibility good enough to take pictures. Water temperature was 82 to 84 F on the surface and 80 F at 75 feet. You can do up to 5 dives a day, 4 day and 1 night dive. Time limit is 50 to 55 minutes plus 3 minutes for safety stop. The divemasters and crew are outstanding. The diving is also outstanding. Small critters are everywhere, along with schools of large bumphead parrotfish. Too many turtles to count,

large school of barracuda and plenty of sharks. Just too many different kinds of fish to list: coral cat shark, leaf fish, frog fish, pipefish, Mandarin fish, crocodile fish, decorator crab, octopus, zebra moray eel, mantis shrimp, nudibranch and pygmy seahorse, and more. Sipadan and Siamil are a must-see if you dive Borneo. Kapalai and Mabul are OK as a change of pace dive. The currents can be strong at times and the surf choppy.

Ocean Rover, May 2007, Leona Holaday (leonaholaday@yahoo.com), Kihei, HI. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 86 to 88 F, calm. The crew and service on this boat are consistently good from what I have heard, and my experience confirmed this. There were 10 on board, and only three were new to this boat, including myself. The rest were repeats, some more than once. The cabins were spacious and nicely appointed. I liked the fact that each shower had its own self-contained water heating unit so you couldn't run out of hot water. The crew was always there to help you - I could barely put on or take off my own wetsuit. The boat was built in 2000 and most of the crew had a hand in its construction, so they were like one big family. The diving was easy. Water extremely warm; I almost fell asleep underwater. Had my 5 mil as I get cold easily, but it was still warm with 4 dives a day. No big critters, but lots of nudibranchs. Limited visibility.

SeaVentures, July 2007, Leigh Clark (lamazon@iinet.net.au), Sandringham, VIC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 5 to 15 Meters. Water: 27 to 29 C, calm, currents, no currents. SeaVentures is a converted accommodation rig which after a number of incarnations ended up moored off Mabul, being used as a dive platform. The rooms