

little effort to get the divers into the water right over the reef so that often it was a struggle just to find the reef. Sometimes dives had to be aborted in the blue. They did do a good job of cleaning up our gear and helping us get it ready to pack up at the end of the trip. They were gracious and deserve credit for being cheerful and eager to please the whole time. Another fact to note was a charge made to my buddy for her weight belt that vanished mid-trip. She would remove it and hand it up at the end of the dive. She was wearing 8 kg (17 lbs.). That is not a weight that one would lose and not notice! Yet, when it went missing from her equipment basket, she was accused of losing it and charged over \$60 at the end of the trip! Capt. David would not entertain the possibility that it could have been misplaced or mixed up with other belts and held her responsible. Check out my web page: <http://e-diver.spaces.live.com>

MV Ocean Dancer, March 2007, Susan I. Welch (siouxwelch@yahoo.com), Stuart, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 125 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm. The Ocean Dancer is an incredible boat, just beautiful, designed and built by David Mesnard with hand-picked wood from different areas in Asia. It is an extremely stable vessel with a shallow draft, perfect for navigating the waters of the Maldives. It is roomy in all aspects, particularly the cabins and main saloon. It has 8 cabins for 16 divers, all with ensuite bathrooms that are also quite roomy. You can have a massage onboard or just relax between dives on the bow or upper deck. The Maldivian crew are friendly, accommodating, and always ready to help you, whether on the dive boat or the mother ship. They assist with a big, beautiful smile. David

(owner/operator) and Gaelle live onboard. Their enthusiasm and love of the Maldives permeates all aspects of the operation of the boat. They add a charm and energy to the vessel that is contagious. You feel like honored guests in a beautiful floating lodge. The diving is done from a 32-foot dhoni. Your dive gear will never touch the beautiful floors of the MV Ocean Dancer. Nor will your shoes! Nitrox is available and highly recommended due to the dive profiles. Seldom does the top of the reef go above 35 or 40 feet. All safety stops are done in the blue. It is all drift diving, using sausages in the safety stop for the dive boat to locate you and pick you up. We were there in the wrong time of the year for whale sharks (November) but did see the large mantas. Beautiful coral, beautiful reefs, and lots of fish life. Also, if you have any interest in free diving, David is an accomplished free diver who will be happy to share some instruction and insight to this fascinating sport. I highly recommend this boat and this location. Book through his USA agent, Peter Hughes. UW Photography Comments: saloon area was used to store/charge camera gear. Adequate setup.

THAILAND

M/Y Genesis, Sea Bees, Palm Garden Khao Lok, March 2007, Bob Sivak (bobsivak@cox.net), Mission Viejo, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 10 to 30 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, currents. Went to Thailand to see the renowned Similan and Surin Islands during whale shark season. Overall, disappointing trip due to poor visibility and zero whale sharks. Sea Bees dive center has a user friendly website with tons of info. I booked a 3 day "north

tour” aboard their live-aboard, M/Y Genesis, and did 2 day trips from their Khao Lok based day boats. The M/V Stingray is a nice catamaran able to hold about 45 divers. We dove 27 divers going to Similan island #9. The mostly German guides were knowledgeable and friendly. After a 3+ hour ride (each way), we did 2 dives with 90-minute surface interval. A green algae bloom is all over the Andaman Sea right now. Guides say they have not seen visibility this bad. Tons of fish at all sites, but I found the coral to be on the thin side. The next day I went on the M/Y Run-away to the “Boonsung” wreck. About 90 minutes each way this time and 2 tanks. This was by far the most monochromatic wreck I have seen, as it was covered in silt. The only item of interest was a couple of crocodile fish. Complete waste of time and money. The “North Tour” included Richelieu Rock and Koh Bon. Every site in the Surins had at least 8 other packed live-aboards at it. Again, the viz was terrible. I found Richelieu to be rather unremarkable. Beside a couple of ghost pipefish, not that interesting. Koh Bon salvaged the live-aboard portion, producing a few large mantas. It also had a nice reef. But with the crowds, it reminded me of Molokini Crater. The M/Y Genesis was a simple but nice live-aboard, especially for \$600. The Palm Garden resort in Khao Lok was also simple but nice. Tasty food and friendly staff. Given the travel time from the West Coast, long boat rides, the overall cost and mediocre diving,

South Siam 3, Sunrise Diving, De-avana Resort, October 2006, Jon Morrow, Gardnerville, NV. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 95 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm. Sunrise Divers in Patong beach put together an outstanding 6-day package of diving. We had a great

live-aboard experience put together by Damian on the South Siam 3. Chris did an excellent job getting my buddy AOW certified during the trip. Chris was very professional instructor and very attentive to make sure the course was a positive experience. Free rental gear in the price of the live-aboard was a plus. Rental gear and the shop are all new since they were all destroyed by the Tsunami. A professional operation with quality people and equipment. The South Siam 3 is a new boat with space for 16 overnight guests in comfortable cabins. The boat is geared around day trips by speed boat from Tap Lamu and is limited to the Similan Islands and Koh Bon. Having the speedboat arrive every day allows you to dive as many days as you want and start and stop whenever. This was important to us since our air connections limited us to a Saturday arrival and departure. The boat schedules five dives daily with those staying on board able to pick any four of the five dives. On arrival day four dives are available and 3 dives are done on departure day. We were picked up and delivered back to our hotel in Patong and taken 1.5 hours north to the speedboat. A 1.5 hour trip by boat brought us to the live-aboard. Be prepared for anything based on weather conditions on the ride across. On rainy days or rough seas the ride can take up to 2 hours or more. Once on board you are given a briefing in English on the boat, time to set up gear and then a dive briefing. Diving starts within 45 minutes of arrival. Briefings by John, the boat manager, were professional and gave a good idea of what to expect. DMs were very competent and the boat was adept at adjusting profiles and groups based upon ability level. I never saw a group bigger than 6. With no Nitrox available, and the usual dive

profile starting at 95', the 50-minute limit on diving was good advice and it was putting us into the caution zone on the computers by dive three of the day. Food was plentiful and good, always Thai and usually something Western. The boat is on a three-day rotation through the Similans and Koh Bon though dive sites were mixed. The boat has the capacity for 50 divers during the day trip though we never saw more than about 18 total divers since this was shoulder season. That might be a problem, though, in the high season. When the speed boat left the remaining 6-12 people dove once more. Some dives were as good as I've seen anywhere in the world. Night dives were offered but generally were not very good. The boat is on the cheap end of the live-aboard scale but was new, clean and well organized. Richelieu Rock is not visited by this boat.

South Siam IV, March 2007, Jon Morrow (morrowjjon@netscape.net), Gardnerville, NV. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 74 to 83 F, currents. My second trip with South Siam, this time on their live-aboard that travels to Richelieu Rock, South Siam IV. This operation allows maximum flexibility for divers with rigid time schedules. The boats remain in the Similans and daily speed boats take you and day divers to the boat and return you at the end of your stay. You can pick the number of days but can't get on or off the boat on the two days it is at Richelieu. We started our trip on South Siam III when SS IV was up north. We made the transfer on the second day when SS IV returned. SS IV doesn't seem to have as many day divers and we had 4 of 5 days with only 9 divers on board. 5 dives are scheduled daily and you pick from 4. I recommend you skip the night dive; limited stuff to see.

On the third dive of the day you will dive with any day trip divers. On SS III this meant about 20 plus the divers on board. DMs are knowledgeable and know about finding small stuff. We saw all of the big stuff in large numbers but visibility issues made seeing anything big difficult. At Richelieu Rock visibility was at best 30'. There were great macro photo opportunities of seahorses, pipefish and nudibranchs but the larger fish were almost impossible to photo due to the heavy plankton bloom. Koh Bon had large numbers of mantas with 6 different encounters at less than 20'. Leopard sharks, morays and turtles were common, with occasional reef sharks spotted on early dives. Food was plentiful but not gourmet. There was always something western and always something Thai. Rooms were basic and toilets were shared. Hot fresh water was always available in the showers. Two fresh water spray nozzles were available on the swim deck when you came out of the water. Entry was always a giant stride off the swim deck. Recovery was usually to the main boat but a Zodiac patrolled to recover divers or groups who drifted too close to the islands or too far away. Strong currents were commonplace, along with cold water upwellings that produced 10-degree temperature changes. I was OK with a 1 mm suit but wore a vest on the last 5 of 23 dives. Great diving, cheap prices, but not luxury. No dedicated area for UWP.



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