

decently equipped gym and a full service spa, where I indulged myself in a hot and cold stone massage (\$80) ... catamarans, sunfish, kayaks, and other water toys, free of charge. ... Down in Bayahibe Beach, for \$20-\$25 a night, you can get a clean room with two beds, A/C, TV, minifridge, and a tub/shower at the green-roofed Hotel Bayahibe, just a block away from the dive shops; divers I spoke with said that the only real issue was getting a shower in before the hot water ran out. ... The nearest recompression chamber is in Santo Domingo, at least a 90-minute drive from Bayahibe.

Ocean Rover, Andaman Sea, Thailand

a grand alternative in troubled times

SARS and terrorism aren't enough to keep me from traveling the world, but I do look for less risky venues. Thailand is one of those, and with airfares at the lowest level in years, I headed for the Ocean Rover, a first-rate live-aboard that reaches exceptional diving. The Andaman Sea is its December till May itinerary -- its best, by the way -- so in March I ventured forth.

First stop, after making an overnight crossing from Phuket, the Similan Islands National Park, nine densely wooded islands with gorgeous talcum powder beaches. At East of Eden, a rocky setting decorated with beautiful corals, I watched big schools of bluefin trevallies and long-nosed emperors racing through schools of baitfish. Big titan triggers were intimidating -- they can chomp down on a fin, or a leg -- and I gave them a wide berth! Purple fire dart gobies, emperor angels, big bannerfish, powder blue tangs, raccoon butterflies, an octopus walking around -- all part of the show. At Hideaway it was hard to see through the clouds of baitfish. At Christmas Point huge stacked boulders created swim-throughs -- and cold currents. I ended in blue water, but the dinghy drivers easily spotted me. At Snapper Alley, a beautiful site, I was briefly tossed about in a washing machine but managed to see a giant moray, batfish, razorfish, schools of white collar butterflies, black and white pyramid butterflies, spotted rabbitfish with bright yellow tail spots, and another octopus. At Ko Bon, there were big schools of snappers, and a manta ray fluttered by. Huge lionfish floated listlessly, and two banded sea snakes -- kraits -- undulated gracefully along the reefs, past sweetlips with such wide, square mouths that they could have been called "shovel nose." And we had yet to reach the best diving!

Mark Strickland, whose knowledge of fish and reefs and photography runs deeper than you can dive, operates the Ocean Rover. Diving in Thailand since 1987, he is the principal author and photographer of "Scuba Guide Thailand (Asian Diver)" and coauthor of Lonely Planet's new "Diving and Snorkeling Thailand." Mark's enthusiasm was catching, and he was always happy to share his expertise. He told us what we would see and where to look -- and he or sharp-eyed divemaster Hans Tibboel was with us on every dive to point out the critters.



The 100-foot, three-year-old craft, with a cruising speed of 10

knots, was built by local labor, including that of its crew. With a naval architect, they designed a boat especially suited for Thailand's remote waters. Comfortable and safe, the Rover conforms to international maritime standards. The 12 crew members are proud of their work -- the engine room is as spic and span as the rest of the boat. This is my 10th live-aboard, and it wins the prize for comfort and service. She has eight cabins with ensuite bathrooms -- hair dryers and toiletries are furnished -- and individually controlled air-conditioning. Each has a nearly queen-sized bed with a top single bunk and ample storage space. Pretty Thai hostesses Pannee and Panthip care for the cabins and change towels whenever you leave them on the floor. Soundproofing meant I was never bothered by next door neighbors or late night revelry. Most divers were from America, including an expat living in the Philippines, another in Saudi Arabia, an Irishman living in London, and another man living in the south of France.

The water (and often the air) was a warm 86 degrees, except for an occasional thermocline. Dives were limited to an hour, so we could get in all our five daily/nightly dives. Mark asked us to take five-minute safety stops and stay five minutes out of deco, as the nearest chamber is up to 20 hours away, with no airlift available. Aluminum 80s, pumped to 3,000+, were arranged in racks behind benches, with an accessory basket underneath each station. I dived Nitrox at \$100 extra (Mark said that they hadn't had an accident since they added Nitrox). Hoses were available for showers, with warm towels after every dive. Facilities for photographers were excellent ... E-6 slide processing ... light tables ... huge rinse tanks ... multiple camera tables ... several 220V and 110V plugs.

An open-air sundeck has lounge chairs and shade. Plenty of water, soft drinks, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, cookies, crackers, and candy were handy. Beer and wine could be purchased by the honor system, and between dives they served us freshly baked snacks.

U.S. Great White Diving

You don't have to travel to Australia or South Africa to dive with great whites. Nope, Great White Adventures boats from San Diego and San Francisco will often get you all the action you need. Here's a report from reader John Kontrik (Lakewood, CO), who took a five-day trip from San Diego last October.

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My wife, several friends, and I had the adventure of a lifetime. We dived with great white sharks. We left San Diego at 10:00 a.m. for a 22-hour trip to Guadaloupe Island, 215 miles WSW of San Diego and 155 miles west of Baja. All diving is in cages as chumming is constant. Two cages are in the water at all times. Each comfortably holds four divers and photo equipment. Divers occupy the cages in 45-minute shifts and use hookahs, not tanks. So you have hours daily to view the critters.

On our first day we had several encounters that lasted 15-20 minutes. On day two there were no great whites, but we had great interactions with curious blues that swam right through the cages. On day three we hit home run after home run. Whites were around from 7:00 a.m. until we left the site at 5:30 p.m. At one time six swarmed around the cages. Two or three at a time were common.

All you will probably see are sharks. There is no diving outside the cage. When you are not in the cages, it is thrilling to watch the sharks on the surface from the top deck.

The 95-foot fishing boat, *The Searcher*, is cramped with small double occupancy cabins and four shared heads, but it works well. Hope for calm seas, which we had on the way out but the return was rough. Nevertheless, this is the real deal.

The five-day expedition to Guadaloupe Island is \$2,250 and runs Wednesdays to Sundays, August through November. One-day expeditions from San Francisco to the Farallon Islands operate September through November. Golden Gate Expeditions, 2038 Pacific Avenue Alameda, CA 94501, 510-814-8256, www.greatwhiteadventures.com.

Luxfer Tank Trade-In Is No Bargain, But Worthwhile

In the March 2000 *Undercurrent*, we reported on the problem of sustained load cracking in certain scuba tanks manufactured from aluminum alloy 6351 before 1990. Some of these tanks developed cracks in the neck and shoulder area. A few catastrophic ruptures have resulted in “serious injury, death and/or property damage,” according to an advisory notice from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Luxfer Gas Cylinders, the major manufacturer of 6351 tanks, recommends that they be electronically tested for cracks at least every 30 months. Many technicians perform these eddy current tests along with each annual visual inspection.

Nevertheless, some shops are flat out refusing to refill 6351 tanks, leaving owners with no recourse but to replace them. In a classic case of turning a near disaster into a marketing ploy, Luxfer has announced a trade-in program for these bad boys, but only Luxfer’s 6351 tanks made in the U.S. qualify, and there are a few other wrinkles to the program, as well.

Owners of the suspect tanks must call the Luxfer Customer Service Department (800-764-0366) to request an authorization number. The customer service representative will ask the model number, serial number, and original hydrostatic test date for each tank. If you’re eligible, the rep will then tell you how to ship tanks to Luxfer — at your expense, about \$15 each — to receive a \$50 credit voucher — now worth \$35 — for each tank.

You take the voucher to a participating dealer and apply it toward the purchase of a new Luxfer 6061-alloy scuba tank, which runs about \$130, without a new valve. So basically you get about 25 percent off the price of a new tank, and Luxfer gets to remove these potentially dangerous cylinders from use while driving customers to its participating dealers. Sounds better than a recall, doesn’t it? And their great \$50 credit program garners them scores of free publicity.

Jim Mularkey of Dallas, TX, believes “Luxfer is doing what is best for Luxfer.” His local dive club is stuck with 50 of the 6351 tanks and — after some shopping — found a dive shop that offered to fill out the paperwork and accept the tanks for bulk shipping back to Luxfer, while providing replacement tanks, less valves, for about \$82 after the Luxfer voucher. Luxfer advises that “it pays to shop around to determine which shops are offering special discounts and programs of their own.”

Still, you save \$35 and lessen your risk of an accident. So you might as well go for it. For more information, check Luxfer’s website (www.luxfercylinders.com) or call 800-764-0366. The trade-in program expires at the end of the year.

The indoor areas had small sofas, two large dining tables, and plenty of space for working on cameras. Audio and video entertainment centers were often used. Many reference books helped us identify fish, and the paperback library was well stocked. Email service was also available -- I got word of the birth of a grandson during the trip!

To dive, one steps down to the spacious “Whaledeck” and climbs into one of two fast chase boats. The crew carries tanks, hands down cameras, and even helps with fins. Within a day or two, they knew everyone’s name and equipment. They helped us kit up, rinsed our masks, made sure we had our weight belts on, and put our fins in the right dinghy for us. The boats have boarding ladders (which needed another rung) and when we returned from a dive we handed up gear before climbing in. On the mother ship, they washed our gear, rinsed and hung our wetsuits -- always with a wide smile -- and even sewed up tears in wetsuits! They didn’t speak much English, but then I don’t speak Thai. (I did learn to say “thank you” in Thai, which brought forth even broader grins.)

The famed Richelieu Rock was busy with several dive boats, so we were in the water before 7 a.m. During three dives here, I was impressed with the white and purple soft corals covering the rocks. Huge schools of snappers cruised around. A pair of orange and white spotted harlequin shrimp munched on a starfish leg. Mark told us that these small shrimp can even overcome a crown-of-thorns. I saw unusual red-barred anthias, a spindle

cowrie on a sea fan, a big boxer mantis shrimp, two starry dragonets, a hawksbill turtle, and a Jan's pipefish. Right under the surface were "Long Toms," big needlefish. I spotted a bright orange frogfish, or clown angler fish, a difficult find despite the loud coloration. A gray cuttlefish was laying eggs in a hole while a darker striped male guarded her as she patiently transferred the eggs to her tentacles and stashed them away. Anemones were everywhere, with many varieties of clown fish, including a red saddle anemone fish in a light bulb anemone. Hundreds of hingebeak shrimp covered the rocks, reminding me unpleasantly of cockroaches. Cleaner shrimp groomed a big grouper and a giant moray. In the distance a school of pick handle barracudas passed by.

White eyed morays, often out in the daytime, were all over the reef. One continually stuck his head into holes in his path, his tail frantically thrashing about.

Next stop Myanmar (Burma) and the border town of Kawthaung. Customs officials came out to check our passports and to collect the \$150 entry fee (in crisp new bills!), and then a representative joined us for the duration. We headed to the Mergui Archipelago, eating dinner along the way. The cook did a great job with Thai food, spicing it to meet the needs of the guests. We always had rice and iceberg lettuce salad. We enjoyed fresh fish, beef stir fry, and other chicken and pork dishes. Often there were stir-fried veggies and always delicious fresh fruit. Desserts were apple pie and ice cream, chocolate cake, blueberry cheesecake -- and two birthday cakes, decorated with carrot and cantaloupe fish! Seating was tight, as the two long tables don't have much space in between. Pan, one of two hostesses, was quick to refill plates or drinks. Lunches might be hotdogs, cheeseburgers, and pizzas, along with the usual Thai dishes. Fried shrimp and French fries were popular, as were chicken curry, noodles with meat sauce, chicken cordon bleu, and egg rolls. Salad and fruit were always on the buffet. Breakfasts included croissants, toast, bacon, eggs, cereal, pancakes, yogurt, fruit, and juice.

We voted not to go to the Burma Banks, as the sharks are not now as frequently seen. So we dived the island Western Rocky, in open sea, surrounded by submerged pinnacles. With great visibility and light, I watched the plain colored cuttlefish laying her eggs, guarded by a male she had earlier mated with, beautifully striped in black and white, with a neon stripe running around his body. A smaller male waited for a turn. Mark pointed out golden wentletrap snails trailing yellow egg batches and each inserting a proboscis into, and thereby eating, yellow cup corals; tiny hairy orangutan crabs; two fat, pink, orange spotted nudibranchs; Halgerda stricklandi, named for Mark, as he was the first to find them; harlequin ghost pipefish; an adhesive anemone with porcelain crabs; and popcorn and eggshell shrimp. I entered a cavern whose walls were covered with huge lobsters, though obscured by clouds of glassy sweepers. Many scorpionfish sat on the rocks. Outside I was entertained by a big school of beautiful flasher (or filament) wrasses, extending dorsal and anal fins for a bright show of color, and I had a peek at a yellow fimbriated eel. So many remarkable and unusual critters!

Overnight we cruised to Black Rock, which was covered with soft coral and cup

Ocean Rover *Andaman Sea, Thailand*

Diving for Experienced	★★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★
Service	★★★★★
Photo/Video Opportunities	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

corals. Here I saw the trip's first sharks -- a leopard and a whitetip -- a group of blackfin barracudas, and silvery pompanos. Snappers, emperors, and jacks were slashing through clouds of greenish baitfish. Two scrawled filefish chomped down on a big jellyfish, and painted spiny lobster antennae stuck out of cracks all along the wall. Swirling surge knocked my knee into a big black spiny urchin. After the dive I treated what looked like a big, black, and bleeding tattoo with lime juice and antibiotic ointment.

At Three Islets I descended through a tunnel carpeted in bright yellow sponges, with a big marbled ray swimming around. Over the sand were lots of 12-inch pipefish and a squadron of squids. During four dives here I found a white harlequin ghost pipefish and two big tiger tail seahorses. Rocky Islet was a madhouse. Thousands, maybe millions, of small fish raced helter skelter, flashing streaks of silver and yellow. A fimbriated eel was waving his head out of his hole and snapping at the swirling fish. The only stationary thing was a stonefish on the sand! I passed over a beautiful stretch of bright red anemones, looking like they had light bulbs inside them. High Rock had a tiger tail seahorse tucked into a fan, as well as more frogfish and cuttlefish. Beautiful lunar wrasses were gobbling eggs laid by damsels, while a sea krait was hunting amid the rocks. The last dive had wild currents, with visibility further limited by a "sandstorm." Finally, we returned to Kawthaung and went into town for a few Myanmar beers at the Moby Dick. A dirty and poor town, but the people were friendly and smiling.

We returned to Richelieu Rock for easy dives with great visibility. At the Bang Sak wreck, I watched a devil scorpionfish lumber around, seeming barely able to move on his pecs. Big porcupine puffers schooled here and reef fish were everywhere.

That night we returned to the Similans for our last dives. Starting at Elephant's Head, I descended into a thermocline of what felt like ice water. Fortunately I passed through it and saw two whitetips and a big hawksbill turtle. A big school of blue fin and giant trevallies, emperors, and mackerel cruised around - - then at some invisible signal suddenly zoomed off and crunched through a cloud of baitfish. East of Eden seemed like a casual stroll through a garden, with perfect vis and light. Morning Glory, site of our first and last dives, was similar, with fish everywhere, including a Picasso trigger, bird wrasses, and Indian bannerfish, who appear to have long eyelashes. So many fish that my head was swimming.

So Thailand, with the right boat -- and the Ocean Rover is the right boat, is a great venue, among the safer in these troubled times, with diving just short of spectacular. I didn't see a whale shark. Or parades of sharks or eagle rays or mantas. Many dive sites were barren limestone outcroppings -- not paradisiacal islands. But, my, what a fish life. And what a boat and crew.

- K.I.



Diver's Compass: Ocean Rover, 10 nights upper double cabin including all meals, all diving, and round trip transfers to the boat, \$2790, plus Burma entry fee of \$150, info@fantasea.net, www.ocean-rover.com. ... Reef & Rainforest, Jenny Collister, info@reefrainforest.com, www.reefrainforest.com, 800-794-9767. ... I flew on Thai Airways with a 2/1 business class special for the 20-hour flight from L.A. to Bangkok. ... I took a couple of days at the Sheraton Royal Orchid (\$155 plus) where all the rooms are riverfront and give you a great view of the busy action on the water. ... At Phuket I spent two days at the Chedi, a wonderful resort (king hillside room including transfer from the airport, \$323.50), www.sawadee.com/phuket/chedi. ... Before I returned, I stayed one night at Bangkok's Amari Airport Hotel (\$155/double).