

palm. Underwater it was the Magic Kingdom. Dive both the north and south ends of Komodo and Rinca and the dive masters Anton, Ian and Imam were excellent at finding pygmy sea horses, exotic nudibranchs and many unusual critters for which Komodo is well known. The currents varied from mild to wicked, but the boat was always moving between islands to get to the best dive sites at the best times for currents and tides. The diving was mostly from a large conformable fiberglass dinghy. The boat operator was excellent at spotting and we never had to wait more than a few minutes to be picked up after surfacing, although in such a remote place with strong currents you must carry a safety sausage and other signaling devices. The area is pristine and increasingly better protected though on a couple of occasions we heard underwater bangs of dynamite fishing. Never saw any areas of reef with significant damage. Dive masters were helpful at finding what you wanted to see but stayed out of the way when we were involved in video or photographing. The night dives were simply great. Never had a mediocre dive and some of the best in our 1100+ dive history. There were always snacks and fruit smoothies during surface intervals and the food was excellent, plentiful and varied. The crew was uniformly helpful, friendly and cheerful and we had congenial diving companions, everything adding to an unforgettable trip. Shore trips to Komodo and Rinca to see dragons, monkeys, deer and even buffaloes. Overnight anchorage at the port of Labuan Bajo on Flores

Island for a good dinner at a local restaurant. Indonesians gladly pose for photos. Tip: always visit a department store where the locals shop before buying from the souvenir shops or local market vendors; they usually have the same items at fixed prices. Going back to LA on coach class included also quite a bit of pampering compared with what you get crossing the Pacific with, say, Continental. Malaysian Airlines planes are almost as comfortable as Singapore Airlines.

MALDIVES

Manthiri, December 1998, Sigal Greenberg, San Diego, CA. Vis: 50-100+. Water: 78-82 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limit 130 ft. The second time I had been on the *Manthiri*. Manique the D.M. had just had an operation so the dives were taken over by Moosa. The outfit was still top notch. Reefs seemed to be dying from El Niño, but the abundance of fish was still amazing. The currents were very strong this trip. We all dove with reef hooks, but it was a lot of fun. The food was amazing also. Lots of fresh fish daily. The Maldives is a beautiful place. *Manthiri* is a fabulous operation! ((960) 32 5634, 32 0323, 32 0324; Fax. (960) 32 5633; e-mail seansee@dhivehinet.net.mv; website www.manthiri.com)

Manthiri, November 1999, Stephen Mann (0788@gateway.nol) Sacramento, CA. Vis: 50 to 75 ft. Water: 84 to 86 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: <110 ft. This was my second

trip to the Maldives. A good organization. Unfortunately all the coral was dead. Lots of fish.

Manthiri, January 2000, Tom Harvey, Hillsdale, NJ. Great, the boat is extremely clean and the crew was both friendly and well-informed. They were experts at their field and as exciting about diving as the guests. The currents are very strong; I have well more than 1000 dives; at one site the 1/8 nylon line that I was using as a reef hook snapped. The fish were plentiful and varied; the coral was 100% bleached white because of a recent dramatic rise in the water temp. The crew, who are devout Sufi Muslims took us ashore on one of their home islands and we attended a non-tourist fishermen's dance during Ramadan and we had a wonderful nite. The downside was a guests' wife who could not find enough things to whine about, and the cheap tips most of the guests left for the crew; one Canadian lady stiffed them entirely. We also spent several days on Bando's Is. The only American on a beautiful, very expensive resort, with a 100% white-bleached reef.

Manthiri, May 2000, Gwen Hyatt, Houston, TX. Vis: 30 to 50 ft. Water: 75 to 82°. Dive your own profile. Divemaster requested no decompression dives w/500 psi at surface. *Manthiri* touted as best live-aboard in Maldives and priced accordingly. Not a great value for money. May is beginning of monsoon season that brought some rain and contributed to

poor visibility. Strong currents were common w/dive briefs, including incorrect directions on most dives but small dive group (6) adjusted underwater. Sadly no mantas or whale sharks despite the soupy water. Really noticed coral bleaching of reefs due to El Niño in 98. All diving done from dhow w/excellent crew. Boat looking tired and in need of refurbishment (planned). Roach infestation very annoying. Food very good, plentiful and varied w/local seafood often.

RED SEA

Excel (Aggressor), April 2000, Ed Heimiller, Streamwood, IL. Vis: 25 to 100 ft. Water: 70 to 73 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: they suggested a maximum depth. I booked on spot right after the Aggressor announced that the *Excel* was now operating for them. I was the only person booked on this trip and it was about to be canceled when Captain Ramy filled the boat with a group from Sina divers; their boat developed gear box trouble and could not be fixed. This would allow me to dive the Red Sea, but did present some problems. The Sina Diver trip was scheduled from Saturday to Saturday, departing from and returning Sharm El Sheikh. Captain Ramy solved this problem by having me join the trip Saturday in Hurgada and doing the "island trip" with the Sina divers, dropping them off in Hurgada Thursday and continuing on up north doing the Red Sea trip and ending in Sharm El Sheikh.