

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.

During this time Captain Ramy was my personal guide and I had the complete *Excel* with a crew of nine to myself. We saw a school of dolphins followed by a small school of false killer whales that came out of the water tail first into the setting sun. During this trip I was enabled to see the best diving spots on both trips for the price of one trip. The accommodations on the *Excel* are great, twin beds or double beds, no bunks of any type. In each room there are plenty of storage, large windows, and a full bathroom with a good size shower. One drawback is that the toilet system is a bilge type so only human waste can go in it and the water system has a slight color to it when it starts. They overcome this problem by supplying plenty of bottled drinking water. The dining area is large with several tables and they serve all meals buffet style and the food is great. I never went hungry and after each dive they meet you with a snack. On the second deck is the lounge with a bar, TV, VCR and stereo system. Outside this area is the covered outdoor area for relaxing, it could be larger. On the top deck is the sun deck with lounge chairs for those wishing to get more sun. The diving is from two Zodiacs and they do get crowded with a full load of divers, but the rides were no more than ten minutes ending in a back roll entry after which they hand cameras to their owners. For getting back in, you remove your weight belt, BCD and tank and then kick up and in with a helping hand. In rough seas getting into the Zodiacs from the boat and reversing the process can be hair-raising at times,

but the crew is always there to help you. (Aggressor Fleet 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2628; Fax 504-384-0817; e-mail: info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

***Excel* (Aggressor), May 2000, Roger Roth, Cincinnati, OH.** Just as wonderful as my visit last year when we dived the Ras Mohammed National Marine Park. Left from Hurghada in Egypt, and went to the Brothers in the southern Red Sea. The two Brothers are a mile apart, and each is less than 6 acres. The walls are somewhat sheer on one side, and a little more gradual on the other. The sheer sides are filled with zillions of golden-red anthias, and numerous other colorful reef fish such as coronet fish, Arabian angels, Titan triggers, blue triggers, moon and Red Sea coral groupers. Undercuts and caverns have large schools of silversides, and sleeping turtles, eels, and resident barracuda. There are also many stands of huge black corals with other sponges and corals growing on them, large sea fans, plate corals, and huge mushroom corals, all indicative of a healthy reef system. The other sides of the islands are covered with fields of soft corals as far as the eye can see, which ranges from 1-200'. While moored at the Brothers, we saw silver tips, white tips, grays, and hammerheads on every dive, however, there is no night diving there by law, because of the great number of sharks hunting for food during evening hours. Night dives were allowed on the journey down to the Brothers and back to Hurghada, where we stopped at a

number of reefs with extremely friendly 6' Napoleon Wrasses, mating goatfishes, schools of Red Sea Bannerfish, spadefish, and batfish. Macro photography was also rewarding. The *MV Excel* is manned by a crew of 12-14, assuring great service, and the onboard chef prepares a delightful array of Egyptian and American foods along with freshly baked snacks between meals. The staterooms for 2-4 people are very comfortable with individual thermostats, and heads and freshwater showers, and plenty of drawer space and a wardrobe for hanging garments. Nitrox is available and remains constant at 32%. Electricity is 240, so travel converters are necessary, but there is plenty of room for photographers and videographers to spread out their equipment at three different stations. There are warm freshwater shower heads on the dive deck and two large steel rinse tanks next to the dive deck. E-6 processing onboard, and light tables are available for immediate viewing. The salon is set up with TV and VCR so videographers can also easily check out their footage after diving. Cairo also has quite a bit to offer the traveling diver.

Lady M, Doris Schaffer, Fallbrook, CA. Spent a week on the *Lady M*, booked through Sinai Divers, which does not own the boat but merely acts as booking and transfer agent. Dived Shaam Samedei, Radir umm Halhala, Radir Arba, Shaab Sharm, Shaab Shirinat, Shaab Wadi General, Habili Radir (Radir East), Shaab Marsa

Alam, Abu Dabab Naba, all south, almost to Sudanese border. The captain, crew and divemaster work for the owner of the boat, an Egyptian who lives in Alexandria and Sinai Divers does not have any say in how they run the boat. The cabins were comfortable and the food was plentiful and quite good but we found little concern about diver health and safety. The *Lady M* carries just one inflatable for 18 divers and just one divemaster. We would not like to be the divers waiting to be picked up in rough seas when the one outboard on the one inflatable conks out. After complaining about bad-tasting air for a few dives (and being told the air was just "old" because it had been sitting in the tanks for a few days) and repeatedly making short dives and draining our tanks, the divemaster finally confessed that they had been inadvertently filling tanks with the compressor intake next to the exhaust of an adjacent boat. The boat has its own water manufacturing system but nobody has ever bothered cleaning out the holding tanks. We showered in water that was always somewhere between urine yellow and rusty orange. Fortunately, the boat provided plenty of bottled water for drinking and teeth brushing. On any given dive site, there could be 8 or 10 boats and they come and go to and from the moorings while divers from previously-moored boats are in the water and swimming back to the boat or doing safety stops. But the real complaint came when the sewage bilges were emptied while they moored the boat and divers were under the boat for a safety stop. The

captain first said it wasn't his fault because the system is automatic. He then admitted that the bilges were pumped while they moored the boat because a toilet was about to overflow and mess up a cabin floor. There must be hundreds of live-aboards on the Red Sea and we suspect that the *Lady M*, even with its problems, is among the best. The Red Sea boats cater to the Europeans and it seems that they are looking for bargains and are content to put up with the kind of voids, risks and indifference we experienced. Diving trips on the Peter Hughes boats, the *Aggressors*, the *Nai'a*, the *Sea Hunter* and the *Solmar V* have spoiled us! (+20-3-5021119, +20-3-5021120; Fax +20-3-5022696; e-mail info@ladym.com; website www.ladym.com)

Miss Nouran, Marriott Beach Resort (Hurghada) Diving World UK, September 2000, Beth Carey (bcarey@inch.com) New York, NY.
 Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 Fahrenheit, calm choppy. Dive restrictions: 130' depth limit, stay close to your buddy, dive only at specified times. Southern Egypt Red Sea. Crew, food, price, other divers and diving were superb. Quesir 2-3 hours away. Diving highlights included (I only have the Caribbean to compare): swimming after a pod of 50-100 dolphins in a shallow bay, seeing a 7' grey reef shark, octopus, 2 crocodile fish, bird-nosed wrasses, anemone fish, Napoleon fish, bump head parrotfish, triggerfish, unicorn-fish, bannerfish. You would hear dolphins though you could not see

them. Many lion and scorpionfish, a few turtles, rays, and morays. The night dives were dull. Coral is more vast than Caribbean - fat, healthy, and colorful. Lots of soft coral. Some divers opted to snorkel with cow-nosed rays instead of diving. Shorba Reef a maze of coral heads inundated with little fishes. The UK travel agent got us to Egypt from Berlin on Shorouk Air, a small Egyptian airline. Saved ourselves \$1.5K. For boat paid \$1,116 USD but it's booked through USA agencies for \$2K, which is not worth. Diving World UK London office failed to snail mail docs describing travel and boat details and airline tickets in a timely manner. Reps in Egypt were diligent and prompt. They met us at the airport and brought us to the boat. Boat is fine by European standards, and fine by me. Our sheets were changed and cabins cleaned every 2 days. The crew guys were nice; they sleeping on deck and did not have a cabin. Exhaust was excessive (in the back of the boat next to dive deck!), the generator was too loud, and the A/C is on only in the evenings to save energy (we were on the sun deck most of the day, but if you wanted to nap inside in the cabin it was too hot). You have to bring your own towels for deck and bathroom. No washer/dryer. Plentiful supply of bottled H₂O. This was a Southern Egyptian route so the boat was docked in Quesir, a 2.5 hour car ride from Hurghada and you have to pass through several intimidating military check points. The other divers were not like some American divers I've run into (i.e. loud, whiney) so that was

a huge plus. The dive guide, Jamal, was nice and safety-conscious, and gave detailed briefings. They have oxygen onboard and there's a decompression chamber in Hurghada that we were never more than several hrs from. My buddy and I got lectured twice because we weren't staying close to each other underwater, but he was nice about it. It was clear he was watching all the divers, and looking out for potential problems. The Hurghada Marriott was super-comfortable and luxurious by USA standards. But the beaches are nonexistent in Hurghada, and there's not much to do. Room rates \$40! Diving World UK: <http://diving-world.com/> (Phone / Fax: 0020 65 447307 / 444568; e-Mail hamed@SeaSerpentFleet.com; website seaserpenthfleet.com)

Miss Veena, August 2000, Bill Garner, Pittsburgh, PA. Vis: 40-70 ft. Water: 80 degrees. Beautiful light wood-paneled boat new, but a problem with sewage. The staterooms smelled so bad it was nauseating and #1 and #2 had to keep the doors open to the hall to stand it at all. Completely useless refrigerators in each cabin but poor storage space. This was designed as a pleasure yacht not a dive ship. Spacious lounge, good meals, helpful crew. 2nd lounge not used. Very small dive deck, not enough room for equipment, not enough baskets for each person to have one. Very slippery dive platform. Four people fell. No camera table. Zodiacs too crowded and with negative buoyancy dives, almost impossible to take camera. (Phone/Fax:

0020 65 447307 / 444568; e-Mail hamed@SeaSerpentFleet.com; website seaserpenthfleet.com)

Miss Veena, Diving World, September 2000, Julian Lamborn, Houston, TX. Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. New (launched March '00) 34 M vessel with a crew of eight serving eighteen divers. The accommodation is excellent, the food plentiful and good. Six night package to the Red Sea Brother's Islands from Hurghada. Twenty dives were undertaken on pristine reefs with 100 ft. visibility. Saw sunfish (mola-mola), manta, sharks, turtles, crocodile fish, scorpion fish, eels! \$50 "park fee" to dive at the Brothers. Not for beginners — the park requires advanced level PTO certification with at least 50 dives. A weekly charter flight from London Gatwick takes divers to Hurghada where Diving World reps organize transfers and overnight hotel accommodations as needed. Top-rated dive trip with multitudes of fish and excellent soft and hard corals made all the better by the quality of the vessel, its crew and their service. No Nitrox or E-6 processing.

Oyster, February 2000, Roger J. Hale, Topsfield, MA. Vis: 75 to 100 ft. Water: 69-75 degrees, choppy, surge, no currents. Dive your own profile. Dive restrictions: 120-130 ft. The Brothers are two small islands 36 miles off the Egyptian coast and are supposed to have exciting diving. Big pelagics, including tiger, thresher and oceanic white tip sharks are supposed to be among the many varieties almost guaranteed to be there. This trip did

not work as expected. It was very windy, cold and rough. Personally only saw two reef sharks in a week of diving and they were on edge of visibility; corals were spectacular, the best I've ever seen. Other fish life also sparse except small tropicals. From what I heard we were there at the wrong time. Boat very comfortable and crew wonderfully helpful. (20 2 3360255; Fax. 20 2 3496685; e-mail Info@OysterDiving.Com; website www.oysterdiving.com)

Oyster, June 2000, Chuck Lane, San Diego, CA. Our group used a package from Golden Tours to fly a charter from London to Hurghada. (Ignore the regulation about a max weight of 5 Kg.. for luggage or you won't be able to carry your reg bag or camera case on board. There's ample overhead storage for a small bag and the crew doesn't enforce this — just the tour operator.) *M/V Oyster* (formerly the Peter Hughes *Moon Dancer*). Although not top of the line, it was very comfortable and well-outfitted — plus the price was right US\$1200 for the week including airfare. You spend the first evening in port and make a leisurely morning departure. The crew claims this is the only way to get in the requisite shallow check out dives, but they could be on site at the crack of dawn. This would allow you to be on The Brothers at dawn the following day instead of midmorning. The South African divemaster Steve gave detailed dive briefings. This was a good thing since we rarely saw him while diving — unless it was while he was shooting photos or video. The

other divemasters were equally “unobtrusive” and only demanded that we never dive a reverse profile. Our group was very experienced and 100% computerized so this appeared not to be much of an issue. (A DCS hit requires a helivac at US\$8000). All diving was done from a pair of RGBs. They crowded them with 8-9 people at times instead of using their 3rd spare RGB. Problem entering the RGBs in the choppy seas; no one was injured, but there were near accidents so a few people skipped dives rather than subject themselves to the bucking stern platform. Boat handling generally acceptable, but twice they dropped divers directly onto coral plateau surrounding The Brothers. With 1 m swells and a depth of 1.5 m, this led to some badly scraped hands as people tried to battle their way to deep water. One diver lost a video housing, which was recovered later. The diving was disappointing. While the visibility was often 30m+, the water was only 25° C — requiring a minimum of a 3 mm full suit and preferably a vest or hood. It was clear and sunny every day so everyone was able to recharge on the sun deck between dives (they also provided warm towels after every dive). While there were a few pelagics, the numbers were not what we'd been led to expect. There were a few sharks (including a hammerhead), a lone manta, a few dogtooth tuna, and a couple of turtles. The hard and soft coral on The Brothers is still fairly healthy with a good population of reef fish, but not as prolific as advertised. The photographers kept busy, but

generally had to hunt for shots rather than burning through a roll in the first half of the dive (the boat offers E-6 processing and SeaandSea camera rentals). While there was some macro potential, the interesting small critters like nudibranchs appeared to be mainly nocturnal. (Night diving is prohibited at The Brothers - we got our only one in off Safaga.) The service was excellent. Tanks were always filled promptly, wet suits hung to dry, and towels provided. Although they were a light on all-day snack availability, the cook generally whipped up some incredible baked snacks for after the mid-afternoon dive. Food was quite good. The breakfasts featured fruit, soup, eggs, yoghurt, etc. Lunches were a bit more varied and dinners were good. On the final night, they had an Egyptian buffet featuring some of their more popular dishes. Although there was a full A/V system and plenty of movies, most of the group was content to gather on the sun deck for cocktails and conversation or simply reading their books. Constant A/C and plenty of fresh water in the cabins plus the huge dining salon were key features for the boat.

Oyster, Egyptian Diving Safari, July 2000, Dr. Bill Creasy, Los Angeles, CA. Our group gathered at the Rameses Hilton Hotel in Cairo and took in the pyramid sound and light show, then on to Hurghada and the *Oyster*. Set sail at 5:30 AM, heading south. The *Oyster* is a three-year old, steel hull, 140 ton vessel, 105 feet in length and 25 feet in breadth, making it quite stable in the open ocean. Its

desalination equipment produces 3,500 liters of fresh water daily. The *Oyster* holds twenty guests in four deluxe cabins with window views, two deluxe cabins with portholes, and four twin cabins with portholes. All were meticulously clean, and remained that way. By the end of each day's first dive, they made up the cabins and had clean linens and towels. Each cabin has individually controlled air conditioning. Temps can soar to 120 degrees. Working with our two leaders, the three *Oyster* dive masters—Steve, They grouped the divers into three categories for our first day's dives, and each dive master led one group. At Middle Reef," a planned 60 foot boat dive for a maximum of 50 minutes — a nice easy dive and a chance for the dive masters to observe our various skill levels. Overnight we motored fourteen hours south to Shaab Sharm, where we logged two dives, then continued south to Wadi Gimal, where we logged two more, the last a night dive. Maximum depth was 130 feet, to begin safety stops with 750 psi, and to be on board with 500 psi, with no reverse profiles. Second day's diving was spectacular. We reveled in the richness of Red Sea life, spotting turtles, morays, blue spotted stingrays, a huge Napoleon Wrasse, a pair of shy banded boxer shrimp, and an elegant Spanish dancer. The third day took us farther south to Shaab Maksur, then on to Cavern Reef and Abu Galawa. On a 130 feet gradual decline through the hard and soft coral of Shaab Maksur, where a pod of dolphins joined us; another to 100 feet on the steep east wall of Shaab Maksur; then a 70-foot

cavern dive at Cavern Reef; and finally two wreck dives at Abu Galawa on a sunken tug boat that was easy to penetrate. Once we got to the third dive, many of our divers switched to Nitrox for the rest of the day. \$6/cylinder. On day four we reached our farthest point south, Abu Deab, 250 miles from Hurgada. This was a four-dive day, with the first dive at Abu Deab, a prime location for spotting white tip, gray and hammer-head sharks. And spot them we did! A fairly strong north/south current limited bottom time due to high air consumption as we swam against it while circumnavigating the reef. Later in the week we reached Elphinstone with a large gray shark cruising and an abundance of small life on the walls, which plunge hundreds of feet. For our sixth dive day we moored above the wreck of the Salem Express, which sank in 1991 while ferrying 690 passengers, with many deaths. On the first dive we explored the stern of the 300-foot vessel, which lies on its port side at 100 feet. The bottom is littered with debris, including passengers' clothing, luggage and gifts. On the second dive, Miranda led some of our advanced divers on a penetration into the cargo hold. It was pitch black, and the scene was poignant. Piles of suitcases filled the hold, many partially opened. Two children's bicycles and a toddler's hot wheels brought tears to my eyes as a vivid picture of the tragedy unfolded. One could hear anguished cries for help and sense the utter terror as 510 people perished in the open water. Returning through the black tunnel of

the cargo hold, I spotted two suitcases bearing travel agent decals reading "Happy Holidays." I have dived many wrecks, but nothing has ever plunged me into such profound sadness as the Salem Express. The last was the best night dive of the trip, as the pinnacles were alive with lion fish, morays, octopus and a variety of colorful nudibranchs. After our last dive we motored north to Hurgada. The crew thoroughly washed our gear while we settled bills. The boat itself served us well. Designed as a dive boat, the lounge is spacious, with TV, a well-stocked selection of dive films and movies, stereo, and a coffee bar that is open 24 hours a day. The gear area in the stern has ample space for twenty divers without being overcrowded. And the sun deck is comfortable, with a refrigerator stocked with bottled water and sodas within easy reach. The Lido deck has a nice sitting area, but we seldom used it, since the air-conditioning compressors are there, making it too loud to hold a conversation. A trip to the deep south Red Sea requires a great deal of running time, most of it at night, so if throbbing engines and a moving boat disturb your sleep, this may not be the trip for you. The culinary creations were superb. Especially memorable was dinner on our second night aboard, which featured caviar and smoked salmon, and our final "Egyptian Night," when we feasted on roast turkey and an array of Egyptian delicacies. Beer and wine were all Egyptian, and the dry, red Obelisque was superb. Wine is \$20 per bottle and beer, \$4. Steve, Amr and Miranda,

presented comprehensive briefings before every dive. The on-deck crew assisted with donning gear, and when we returned from a dive, the crew replaced our gear, hung our wet suits to dry, and wrapped us in warm towels. On Zodiac dives, we left our gear in the Zodiacs and it magically appeared in the correct place, with full tanks for the next dive. Those who wished to be led were led competently; those who wished to dive independently were free to do so. Throughout the trip, Steve, Amr and Miranda established a warm relationship with each diver, and they maintained a great sense of humor throughout the week. Two divers became Advanced Open Water divers while on board, taking wreck, deep, night, navigation and drift diving. One took a photography course. One Nitrox. And one opted for a two-dive "rebreather experience" on the *Oyster's* Draeger Dolphin. The *Oyster* is a Technical Diving International (TDI) facility, and those who provide prior notice can sign on for extended range and trimix diving. This was an excellent trip, and our third to the Red Sea.

***Samaher I*, June 2000, Marianne Daniel, Walnut Creek, CA.** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 75-79 degrees. The people of Egypt in general and the *Samaher I* in particular were wonderful. If you wanted something all you had to do was ask. The boat was very pleasant — dark wood and brass fittings, comfortable seats and rooms. The rooms were very small, but with comfortable bunkbeds. Each room had its own bathroom with shower. The

dive deck was not roomy, but divers moved pretty well from their chosen stations to the dive platform. Food was excellent, well prepared, and plentiful. Dive briefings were thorough and detailed. The Bad: Towels and sheets were readily changed but only when requested. The entire bathroom became a shower enclosure. Diving was done from inflatables; you donned all your equipment, walked down stairs on either side of the dive deck and boarded an inflatable that took you to the drop off point. The inflatable picked you up when you finished your dive. I was unimpressed with the crew's safety practices. I believe they were ignorant of the standards expected by (this group of) Americans. Again, if you asked for extra attention you got it. Morning surface conditions were typically very rough, with 2-3 meter swells and a lot of surface chop. In the afternoons the wind died down and the surface flattened out somewhat. The diving was mediocre; after I arrived home, a diver friend who's from Egypt told me that's normal for diving trips leaving from Hurghada. He said the diving from Sharm el Sheikh is much better: more sea life, better wrecks, better conditions. I wore a 3 mm one-piece wetsuit plus a 1.5 mm hooded vest and was comfortable. ((203) 424.96.40 Fax: ++(203) 424.96.50; e-mail: samaher@soficom.com.eg; website www.samaher1.net)

SUDAN

***MS Aurora*, Sudan, May 2000, Thomas Lippert, Brugg, Switzerland.** Vis: 60-120 ft. Water: 24