

degrees Celsius. Dive time 60 minutes (pick up by inflatables). Diving in the Sudan is an experience. There are only 5-10 live-aboards, most under Italian flag. The *Aurora* is 60-70 ft. wooden sail boat with engines used all the time. The accommodation is quite basic (twin cabins, no AC or fan) with a wet all for two cabins. Most of the time people sleep on deck, because it is too hot in the cabins. On deck ok. Food was average, lot of pasta, sometimes fresh fish. Drinks must be bought (water, \$1.50, beer \$4, wine). With full load of 16 people a bit crowded but ok. Diving is for experienced divers. Diving with computer and own profile is encouraged, no depths limit (remember, Italian run operation, very different to the US) only time limit of 60 min for pick up by the two inflatables easier. The dive guide went on every dive, but nobody had to follow. The diving is very often deep (60+ meters=190+ feet) and deco stops are very common. Possible because 15l steel tanks are used (105 cubic ft.). The trip goes to famous places (14 days) Shaab Rumi (where Cousteau had his underwater village. Precontinent II) with a lot of corals and fish, the wreck of the Blue Bell (Toyota wreck) with many car wrecks and two swim throughs (in 42 and 60 m), at the south points with hammerheads (even schools), but again quite deep (50+ m), Angorosh (mother of sharks), again with schools of hammerheads in the deep water, some at Sanganeb (chance to go on land and to climb the light house). Large groupers (up to 2m+), school of barracuda (100+), grey reef sharks, silvertips,

Napoleons, buffalo heads, stone fish, scorpion fish, nudibranchs and the usual reef fish (butterfly, angel, anemone, parrot, trigger) Either first dive or last (close to Port Sudan) the wreck of the Umbria (wine bottles and ammunition). Normally 2 dives a day (ok, because nearly every dive is deco, enough for me) with 1 night dive a week.

THAILAND

Aqua One, February/March 2000, Brant Shenkarow, San Anselmo, CA. Vis: 60 to 150 ft. Water: 80 to 84 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: suggestions only based on multi dive profiles. A top pick dive experience on a comfortable well-fitted spacious boat. Earnest crew can only get better as English becomes more widely spoken. Great food to accommodate diet, taste and nationality. Spacious cabins w/quiet A/C and huge en suite baths. Dive operation headed by ex-pat American John and supported admirably by locals Kon and Pat. Itinerary covers huge expanse of Andaman Sea off Thailand and Burma with almost every site being excellent. Able captain right on the mark and right on schedule. Dives from zodiacs and dive platform. Great prep crew. Scubapro rental gear very reasonably priced. Entire trip, 7 nights, 6 dive days w/4-5 dives per day. All rental gear except photo; Burma fee; 10% crew tip (opt) totaled \$1700, making this tour one of the best deals on the seas. Problems involved pre-trip communications, including mix-up in hotel and transfer day before boarding;

wet suit not provided; vagueness regarding currency requirement for Burma fee. Each problem was addressed and solved quickly and beyond my expectations. Fairly new company and Internet communications expect a few hitches. Again, will only get better in my opinion. Noticed photo lab was overpriced and poorly equipped. Excellent stash of DVD and video movies. Spacious sundeck, shaded deck, and A/C lounge. All comforts of Aggressor and Peter Hughes at estimated 30% discount to those outfits. Highest recommendation. (888-996-2782; Fax: 303-652-8604 ; e-mail aquaone@bigplanet.com; website www.dive-aqualine.com)

Aqua One, Aqua Sports, February 2000, Ray and Cheryl Stobaugh, Atkins, AR. Vis: 80-120 ft. Water: 78-80 degrees. Dive restrictions: Dive your computer, 120' max. Come back with 500 psi. our second live-aboard ever. The boat was really nice. We had an economy room that meant smaller and shared a head with 2 other rooms. Some rooms were large with head. Nice dining room, library and covered and uncovered decks. 4 dives per day. Some dives from the boat. Some we were picked up by dingy. Crew very helpful. American Dive Cruise director. Thai crew. Thai cuisine. Cover a large area from Phuket to the Burma border. Saw our 1st whale shark. One guest had video sent it to all passengers. A 2 min. shot. Great. Beautiful coral hard and soft and anemones. Hundreds of lion fish, clown fish, clouds of small reef fish, cuddle fish, star fish, manta shrimp,

our 1st sea horse, leopard shark, yellow + black banded sea snakes, manta rays, butterfly fish, Moorish idles, clams. Price included from LA, overnight Bangkok, to Phuket, to boat, to Bangkok overnight and back to LA.

Aqua One, March/April 2000, Suzanne Schauwecker, Los Altos, CA. After reading Undercurrent, I realized we were probably on the best live aboard in the area. Especially, the rooms with private heads....excellent; two with single beds, side by side and two with Queen size beds on same deck as dining/lounge and dive deck. (Very convenient if you want to avoid lots of stairs) The rooms on the lower deck shared a bath and those aft were very small. I could not stand up straight in one of them (am 6' tall) and they were near the galley....that seemed dirty and smelly....the less I knew about it the better. Also, the crew shared the head with the female guests....not too pleasant for either of them. The lower deck cabins in the front were much nicer although still a bit strange configuration....no real bunks, but very little head room and either beds were placed cross wise or at different levels parallel to each other on opposite sides of a very small room. Storage, however was decent. Food was mostly Thai and was pretty good, but usually a mystery about what we were eating. The Thai crew was fabulous, but had very little English. The biggest problem was the "cruise director," an American named "Johnny." I would describe him as an aging beach bum. He introduced himself as the "cruise director,"

although “I have no idea what that means” He had invited one of the female (beautiful, young) guests to stay on board from the following cruise “to polish his regulator.” Fortunately, she was a jewel, a tremendous asset and helped out everywhere, from helping set up the meals (all buffet style) to clearing tables, handing us hot wash cloths when surfacing from dives and making sure we had cool water to drink before and after every dive! Johnny, however, had not a clue what his role should be....he never introduced us to the crew, either on the first night or the last. (I was on a 10-day trip). Johnny has lived in Thailand for nine years, but never bothered doing any translating between the Thai divemaster and the divers. Also, on board were a Thai photographer, who showed us one excellent slide show and had a book in which he had contributed photographs. Unfortunately, he dropped his cameras down the stairs (most of the photographers took their cameras up to the sheltered sun deck or library upstairs to work on them) and got off the boat after a few days to go to Bangkok to get it repaired. Also, a French photographer and his Thai girlfriend were on board. Although the French fellow was very pleasant, he hadn’t a clue about the dive sites, never checked on the divers or showed them anything of interest; he was too busy with his video camera. His Thai girlfriend was very helpful and had the best understanding of English of all the Thai crew. She left in the middle of the trip to help one passenger who thought she might

have DCS to help with translation. That left the Thai dive master, who was excellent at finding all the exquisite little creatures of the sea, but only one or two passengers at a time could keep up with him and benefit from his expertise. He was also very shy and polite (a wonderful Thai characteristic), which inhibited him from speaking up to Johnny. On our last dive, we were dropped from the back of the boat into 15' visibility, with knot 3 currents to swim around a pinnacle in the sea. Only two of us were able to see the Thai divemaster. My buddy never found me, surfaced early because of the difficult diving conditions, saw the dive master surface and had to wait 30 more minutes before I came up. He was sure I was lost! Actually, I just like a slow ascent and therefore, take more time coming up from 82' (third dive of day, last dive of 10 day, 3 dives/day trip). The good stuff: Excellent Thai crew, excellent group of divers....all very experienced and had dove together for years. Saw some unique sea life, yellow sea horses, harlequin ghost pipe fish, harlequin shrimp, tons of mantis shrimp, mating and egg-laying cuttlefish, leopard sharks, wonderful razor and hawkfish, mantas, plus all the usual cast of characters. Forget the whale sharks...no where to be seen (for past two years). Nearly every site had damage from dynamiting or fisherman’s cages or nets or lines....one leopard shark had two hooks in mount with long lines coming from them. There are too many dive boats on every site. I think there are 34 live-aboards in Thailand.

For someone who usually dives Solomons, PNG, Indonesia it was a shock to see so many dive boats. Also, always present were fishing boats and in all the local markets baby sharks and other endangered species were for sale. Water temperature 84 degrees, visibility mostly fairly poor: 15' to 50" occasionally. Spectacular thunder and rain showers every night, including rain on my roommate's bed, which the owner of the ship (on board for first week of trip) and Johnny knew about and did nothing about. I went to the Captain and showed him the pool in our room (I am reading the "Worst Journey in the World": an account of the exploration of Antarctica with Scott, and the author describes how their boat, the Terra Nova leaked water into their bunks that they diverted with sail cloths....we did the same thing with sheets of plastic). They caulked and fixed the leak immediately! Mostly sunny, hot, humid days, fairly calm sea, occasional surge near rocks and currents (always in the opposite direction from dive briefings from Johnny who never checked them himself....he always got into water after everyone else to do his own photography) Needless to say, we dove our own profiles...can't really go too deep on most sites...think this trip was the first where I did not go down to at least 100 feet. We could dive as long as we wanted. Most of my dives lasted 60 to 90 minutes. (I don't use much air). Only the French photographer saw turtles, but they were there. Dolphins once, no whales. No other sharks besides leopards. In general, sites were very interesting, either

rocks and boulders with fascinating life or damaged coral reefs, still fairly full of life, or reefs covered with sea urchins and anemones. Overall, I saw some fascinating sea life and reefs, but would not return.

Fantasea, April 1999, Marguerite K. Shepard, Carmel, IN. Vis: 70 to 100 ft. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes. That the southwest monsoon was coming early and that there were no whale sharks. I'll definitely go back when the new boat is completed. ((+66) 76 340088 or 295511; Fax: (+66) 76 340309; E-mail: info@fantasea.net; website www.fantasea.net)

Fantasea. Mar/April 2000. Jim Chubb, Ketchum, ID. Spring break with the wife and kids. Offshore Thailand and Burma, the Andaman Sea: Similan Islands, Richelieu Rock, Burmese Mergui Archipelago, Koh Tachi. Hot and sunny, light winds, flat seas with water temps 82-85 degrees (expecting 78). Some plankton but visibility, 30 to 80 feet more than 25 dives were not a problem. There was usually some mild to moderate current but vast areas of shelter behind the huge reef structures were always easy to find and there was never any need for struggle or worry in any case because after the safety stop, wherever you surfaced was fine and the small boat pickups were always very quick. Groups sometimes got a bit scattered, safety sausages were routinely deployed, it was no big deal. The diving: Fantastic. Great passing clouds of schooling fish blotted out

the underwater sunlight. Unbelievable species density and diversity, stuff everywhere! One dive at the Three Islets in the Mergui Archipelago I found a big gorgeous cone shell hunting with its stinger out, swam through canyons and an illuminated, fish packed tunnel right through the center of the big islet, lingered with a banded sea snake for 5 minutes as it hunted along a wall, saw a mating cuttlefish menage a trois, Harlequin Shrimp, smasher and slasher varieties of Mantis Shrimp, lobsters, crabs, nudibranchs, sea horses, the usual large number of Scorpion, Lion and Stone Fish, a vortex of barracuda, vast rivers of glass fish, lightening-fast big jacks and snappers, groupers, an enormous manta ray with a fishing net draped over its head, cut away by Rob the dive master who acted directly and effectively. The unhampered giant came back and swam slowly right up to Rob, face to face and stuck around for a while.... That's just one dive at one site and really, except the manta, very typical for the trip as a whole: wonderful diving with almost too much to look at. Everywhere there are thousands of different varieties of fish, mollusks, crustaceans, tunicates, Moray eels from tiny to gigantic, hard corals and vivid soft corals in profusion at most sites, There is also a dramatic underwater landscape: walls, arches, tunnels, cuts, canyons, huge granite boulders, many pinnacles...even some relatively flat terrain at the Burma Banks 60 miles offshore, where you find sharks and crystal clear water. For the whole trip, not many sharks overall— shark fin

soup?— and no Whale Shark encounters at all. They say that Taiwanese fishermen have been hitting the whale sharks really hard, marketing their meat as a tofu substitute, if you can believe that. Three years ago whale sharks were seen nearly daily; this year, just one in three months. Perhaps it is La Niña or something else in the natural world causing the scarcity but the thinking on the boat was that it was fishing pressure on the Whale Shark population. Dives were nearly all multilevel, one hundred feet to fifteen feet, therefore depths and profiles could be as moderate as you'd like and you'd run out of air way before you ran out of bottom time or being totally awed. There were usually 4 dives each day, sometimes five. No restrictions other than be smart, be safe, and don't touch, chase or harass the wildlife. Dive briefings were clear and comprehensive. Cruise director and photomeister Mark Strickland and Dive Master Rob hadn't had a day off for 60 days and still showed friendly enthusiasm and both knew where to find the most incredible small rare critters. The boat is well set up for photographers. Food was great. Thai crew excellent. Sunsets spectacular. The old boat, while comfortable enough, shows some age and a new one is due in December 2000. Despite the long flight, we will return. (get Prosom from your doctor, it puts you out for ten hours or so.) Fantasea Divers Phuket has a great website too and strong email support; look them up.

**Genesis I, March 2000, M.S.
Ginsburg, Tampa, FL.** Wonderful

crew and friendly divemasters. Boat is fast and rides well, engines are quiet enough for motoring at night. Spring for the single cabin because all cabins are 4x6' so doubles are very tight, but big window, shelves and good AC made them tolerable. I have no idea what we'd have done with the cameras if there hadn't been an open single cabin. There's no salon or lounging area, so you sat at the dinner table stools or laid in bed (no headroom to sit up). Lunch and dinner were plentiful and delicious (Thai food, mostly), but breakfast was always eggs, cheese and fatty meats. Motored over 8WKM on this itinerary, so stopping in Burma one night to tour a temple was a nice break. Got 3-5 dives a day (40 in 10 days). Diving was follow the leader, stay in a group and surface after 40 minutes on most dives. Night dives weren't always offered and had a 30 min limit! If you're taking photos, forget wide angle, it was impossible to get a clean shot with silt and bubbles from other divers. Dives were conducted from boat via live drop or from an inflatable with no ladder (fun getting back in). Diving was good, but not great, vis varied from 50' to just 20'. No whale sharks or mantas and only 2 whitetips and a potato grouper on the highly touted shark feed. Supposedly this was a whale shark cruise, yet I was told none have been seen for 2 yrs. due to poaching in Malaysia. Interesting nudibranchs, eels and cuttlefish. East of Eden, a lovely coral garden veiled with clouds of baitfish being marauded by swift blue jacks. There at Red Rock and Purple Rock, and got

some fine images including a moray (his face peppered with urchin spines) grouper gulping down an unhappy fish. ((66-76) 280607; E-mail: info@genesis1phuket.com; website www.genesis1phuket.com)

Pelagian, February 2000, Bob Puschinsky, (puschinsky@aol.com), Seabrook, TX. Vis: 50-150 ft. Water: 80-82 degrees. Dive restrictions: No Nitrox. Unbelievable numbers of small critters. Manta shrimp, stone fish, lion fish (huge), scorpion fish (huge) morays. One dive with many friendly sharks and rays; ghost pipe fish, pygmy sea horse, terrific coral and fans. (800-962-0395; 954-229-8022; Fax 954-351-9740; e-mail diveasia@diveres.com; website www.dive-asiapacific.com)

Pelagian, March 2000, Gary A. Lindenbaum, Ridley Park, PA. Vis: 140 to 20 feet. Water: 80 to 85 degrees, calm and flat. Dive your own profile? Yes. Dive restrictions: None. There are about 40 live-aboards in this area now. Dynamite fishing is widely evident and was ongoing even while I was in the water, quite an experience. Dive boat etiquette unknown here. A live-aboard pulled into a dive site right over my head and deposited 30 Japanese divers on the fly. *MV Pelagian* has plumbing, a/c, and chemical fumes problems. Two lower forward cabins not fit for human use. Divemasters fair; one fired at end of trip. Steering broke on boat so couldn't go to Burma Banks. Whale sharks are now being actively hunted in the area, Japanese and Taiwanese

firms have placed a bounty of 8000 baht, \$730 USD for each animal. Five were found on a beach finned while we were there. Bottom line, been there, done that, won't go back; much better places to dive.

Pelagian, April 2000, Clayton Fuller, Chula Vista, CA. Vis: 10-80 ft.

Water: 79-84 degrees. Dive restrictions: be considerate. If you've been there, dove that, then this is the place to go. The boat leaves Phuket (the "h" is silent) and travels north along the coast. You dive the Similan Islands and Richelieu Rock before heading into Burmese waters. Some sites in Burma were so untouched, I felt I had no business being there. It was as though I got a glimpse of Nature's secret garden. The sea fans and corals were so delicate, with their fragile ends, that I was especially aware of my fin tips. I only had to wear a 1/2 mm neoprene suit with six lbs. of weight. This is an 11-day trip that offers creatures both large and small, pelagic and benthic. Our second dive was with two giant manta rays. They were playful and interacted with us. We didn't see mantas again until we were back in Thailand at Koh Tachai. There three stayed with us the entire dive and did quite a few acrobatics. I still have dreams about that dive. In Burma, we saw a few cuttlefish that were quite friendly. They would approach you and change colors to show their interest. At one site, we found two cowries laying eggs. The cowries had black and gold soft mantles that when touched, would rise to show their hard shell. I also saw

some spectacularly colored nudibranchs. My log book reads like an ultimate dive trip. I had my fingernail cuticles cleaned by banded coral shrimp and dancing shrimp. Saw a couple varieties of ghost pipefish. Had never even heard of a unicorn fish. There were also colorful and pretty Moorish idols, trident triggerfish, large potato cod groupers, beautifully colored oriental sweetlips, seahorses, octopus, banded coral snake, frogfish, lionfish, eagle rays, scorpionfish, porcelain crabs, spiny lobster, and sharks (only at the Burma Banks). And anemones in abundance, with both beige and blue mantles. Tons of baitfish. It was as though this place is the breeding grounds for the ocean. These schools of minnows would sway as a group; it was like having a curtain of ballerinas in unison. The diving was around deserted islands. This provided shelter for the small cleaner fish that would eat the parasites off the larger ones coming in for a grooming. The numerous cleaning stations gave us a chance to see the fish up close and still. I even saw a two-foot puffer, with two remoras on it, come for a shave. As far as the boat itself, you must remember that these are not floating Peninsula Hotels, they are dive boats. They operate in a tough humid marine environment. The diving is done from dinghies that have a ladder to climb back in. The stern has a large dining table in the center and benches on the sides for your tank and BC. You store your gear in net bags on the starboard; where you pick it up on the way to the dinghy. They do not have hangers for

your wetsuit, so BYOH and some surgical tubing to lash it down with. The inside décor was okay with several sofas in the main lounge and a TV with a VHS deck only. The camera room was large and had 110V and 220V. The suites had only 220V. The boat itself is quiet, which is a blessing when you are moving to new dive sites at night. The suites are more like a Motel 6 room: nothing fancy. You have your own bath and closet. The beds are comfortable and the towels and linens are changed every day. The staff is very friendly and genuinely helpful. The skipper, Matt, is an excellent captain and you always felt safe in these foreign waters. The divemasters worked hard to make sure everyone got what they wanted. They served all meals buffet style. Toast and cereal were out every morning before the first dive. Then breakfast was usually eggs and bacon made to order. Another dive, then lunch would consist of rice, soup, salad, and a meat or chicken dish. Then its nap time before another dive. Dinner was usually rice, soup, salad, and a Thai style preparation of beef, chicken, or calamari. The sunsets were gorgeous and it was always warm. A diver on the boat gave me a little tip for a long trip like this: wear cotton socks beneath your booties to protect your feet from chafing. I found the ankle length ones just perfect.

Pelagian, August 2000, M. S. Ginsburg, Tampa, FL. My 20th live-aboard and the nicest vessel yet, decorated in light colors, roomy and practical for diving. The big camera

room had storage, good lighting and reliable E-6 processing. A great selection of ID books, novels and movies in the comfortable salon. Accommodations and amenities varied from nice budget cabins (#6) to the stupendous owner's suite with TV and VCR, which I first mistook for a karaoke lounge. All services were excellent and crew was cheery. Food was plentiful, but mediocre with little attention to detail. Raw chicken and uncleaned soft shell crab were served as was undercooked hard eggplant, Meats were usually tough and dry. Good breakfasts made to order and featured Asian specialties like nasi goreng and rice porridge with fresh sambal along with the usual American eggs and great banana pancakes. Beer was \$2. Coffee and sodas were free. With Larry Smith as cruise director and Michael Aw as photo pro, we had someone to find critters and someone to show us how to shoot them. Larry's unbridled enthusiasm is contagious. We appreciated Michael's videos and generosity in demonstrating his array of high tech toys. Diving is from 2 dinghies with ladders. Only limits are 75 min. or 300 PSI and they encourage buddy diving but don't police you. I took full advantage of the freedom to get away from everyone. Some upwellings, downwellings and incredible surge. Dives varied from good on the way to Komodo to magical in Komodo's Horseshoe Bay. Macro territory, so expert nudibranchs, ghost pipefish, live shells, crustaceans and a variety of colorful tunicates and crinoids. Saw a butterfly fish hiding in an anemone and a zebra

crab that crawled out of a sea cucumber's anus. A few sharks and a huge ornate woebegong. At Tichno Reef, I was enveloped in a massive school of blinking flashlight fish. It was one of my most incredible experiences yet.

June Hong Chian Lee or The Chinese Sailing Junk, Warm Water Divers, February-March 2000, Sabrina Fierman, New York City, NY. Vis: 10-100 ft. Water: 75-80 degrees. Restrictions: 5 minute safety stops. Did two trips on this very spacious boat, one 4 day/5 night to Similans and Surins and 8 day/9 night to Burma Banks. Crew is excellent; dive staff also fantastic with excellent briefings with advanced divers doing their own thing and fewer confident divers always had instructor. Dove

from Zodiacs and due to strong currents (required everyone to have safety sausages that they gave away) 2 zodiacs zooming around to pick up divers — no serious waiting. En-suite bathrooms! Decent food; air conditioning, video, etc. Similan and Surins were great for corals and fish of all kinds. Richeleau Rock too crowded — no wonder they are not seeing any whale sharks there. Surans are nicer, less crowded, less stress on reefs and beautiful sites. Burma was ok — did some exploration that did not pay off. Sharks, but not in abundance. Lots of dynamite fishing which is supported by Thai Mafia! Saw jumping marlin from the boat! Great boat to charter and fill up with your friends. (66-76-342186; Fax: 66-76-342453; e-mail: info@thejunk.com; website www.thejunk.com)

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