

MALDIVES

MV Keema, November 2000, Dexter Quiggle, Woodland, CA. Vis: 30-90 ft. Water: 80-82 F. El Niño had caused great damage to the hard coral. Sheer number and variety of fish made this my best live-aboard ever. The boat was comfortable — we had 6 divers. It can accommodate 12 which would have been crowded. The cabins were tight, but very comfortable (en-suite facilities) air conditioning worked well. Plenty of food, but it was a bit bland. We would have preferred to have the spicier food the crew was eating. Diving was phenomenal. Sharks on every dive — large schools of trevally and tuna and so many schools of reef fish you could hardly see 30 ft in front of you. The highlight of the trip was two Manta cleaning stations. The first one had 9 Mantas circling 30-40 ft away for about 15 minutes. The second we settled onto a sand bottom at 65-70 ft near two small coral outcroppings. Within a few minutes we had 11 Mantas circling the cleaning stations, and after about 20 minutes they swooped close enough to let us stroke their stomachs, absolutely incredible. This lasted for about 55 minutes. There were 3 dives/day and a night dive. Two of the night dives were rather Ho-Hum, but on another it was high voltage-white tip reef sharks zipping by, some within a few feet, and again the incredible number of reef fish, nudibranchs etc. Andy Hart did an excellent job as did Higardo the Maldivian dive guide. We will return!! (Ph: (+960) 313537 / 313539; fax (+960) 313538; e-mail intlink@dhivehinet.net.mv)

Madivaru 7, November 2000, Bob Woods (bobwoods@pacbell.net), Hillsborough, CA. Vis: 20-50 Ft. Water: 80-82 F, calm. My wife and I and 6 friends spent 9 days on the Madivaru 7 a comfortable boat. Service was superb. The food was excellent if repetitive. Coral was OK but not great. Plenty of lionfish, unicorn fish, fire dartfish. several Napoleon wrasse, ranging in size from about 75 lb. to nearly 400 lb., schools of Oriental sweetlips, powder-blue surgeonfish, batfish, blue triggers, and clouds of anthias. We saw turtles on most dives, frequent white-tips, Maldives anemonefish, and bluefin trevally. A DM who was brand new and had never dove the sites before, because the regular DM (Azeez, whom we later found to be superb) was occupied with a group who had arrived before us. The new DM had no idea where he was. We had the feeling that no one was in charge and that the itinerary was poorly organized. No one asked to see our C-cards or logs until the last day, nor was any attempt made to distinguish among the divers' skill levels (ranging from 10 dives to instructor). The boat also stayed close to Male to drop off and pick up other passengers so we never got very far from the capital, and I believe we missed most of the best diving. Most dives were deeper than necessary (because that's what the Europeans wanted?), nearly all below 100 feet, but we rarely saw anything of note other than the occasional shark below about 60 feet. A very nice trip, but we probably would have done nearly as well with a land-based operation. (Ph:

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Manthiri, December 2000, Brett & Lorna Morgan, (brmorgan@tri.net.sa).

Visited North & South Male Atolls, and Felidhe Atoll. The weather was generally fine although, as it was the transition between the monsoons, we had a few days that started off sunny but became overcast, windy and rainy but remained warm. The water conditions inside the atolls were fine, but it did get choppy between atolls. Also, some of the Dhoni trips to the outside of the reef proved a bit rough. Visibility varied from poor to excellent I dived in a 1.5 mm full wetsuit, adding a 0.5 mm t-shirt as the week went on, and a 3 mm shorty for some night dives. My wife dived with a 3 mm full wetsuit and a 3 mm shorty. Temperature, 81 F to 84. We managed at least three dives a day, with (usually) a late afternoon or night dive. We saw plenty of whitetips, a handful of grey reef sharks, lots of eagle and sting rays, plenty of turtles and napoleon wrasse, tuna, wahoo, jacks, etc., etc., etc., and about six zillion various tropical fish. No whalesharks or mantas, (we were about 3 weeks too late). We also saw several schools of dolphin while moving. The boat itself was spacious, very well presented and maintained, (as was the Dhoni). The salon was huge, with plenty of space for everyone to gather without feeling cramped. The cabins were spacious and comfortable and kept clean. The Manthiri crew were probably the best we have

experienced. They kept mainly to themselves, but were always helpful, friendly and efficient. Manik and Moosa were terrific divemasters. We thoroughly enjoyed the diving, and both the guys did their very best to ensure that every new dive was as well organized and enjoyable as the last. There was almost always an A plan and a B plan, depending on conditions once in the water. The briefings were pretty good and they both showed enthusiasm. The Dhoni crew made sure that our diving was as effortless as possible — our gear was well looked after and always set up properly, and we never had to wait more than a couple of minutes to get picked up after a dive. The tanks were always filled at a distance from the main boat — so there was no noise, or the Dhoni would set out early for the next dive site, filling the tanks along the way. Arrangements on land were well organized and smooth, thanks to Adam and his team. Coral bleaching noticeably worse compared with our last trip to the Maldives. As there was only one Dhoni, photographers and non-photographers were forced to dive together, not a good combination. We're not photographers and wanted to enjoy the strong currents at channel mouths (using reef hooks to hang around and watch the action) and some of the powerful drifts, but most of the photographers found it hard going handling cameras and dealing with the (strong) currents and so preferred less extreme conditions. Luckily, group diving was not enforced and we were usually left to do our own thing provided we kept

bottom time between 40 and 50 minutes, which was a bit frustrating as we usually surfaced with at least 1000 psi but, when you have 12 divers to look after I suppose that some restriction is inevitable). The food was often served before everyone was ready, and some of it ended up cold before we had started. Although each cabin had a small mini-bar, the drinks were not included and if, like us, you like a cold beer after the last dive, and a night-cap before bed, the bill soon mounts up. All the other live-aboards we've been on included this in the cost. (Ph: 877-357-0022 (US) or 960-325634; fax 960-3250633; e-mail seansee@dhivehinet.net.my; website www.manthiri.com)

Manthiri, January 2001, Doris & Bob Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net)
Fallbrook, CA. Vis: 30-90 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dives logged: 2500+. Lots of dead coral (mostly above 30 feet) but an abundance of reef fish and the variety and amount of sea life is spectacular. Numerous channel dives in strong currents with plenty of sharks, eagle rays, batfish, Napoleon wrasse, tuna, jacks, turtles, octopuses and smaller critters only found in Maldives. Boat shows wear and tear but is clean and comfortable with some nice touches (like fresh towels daily and fresh linens several times during the 10-day trip). Crew is shy but friendly, accommodating, attentive and competent, and they arranged island visits and one excellent local musical performance. Food is not particularly good, but adequate considering limited supplies and

minuscule galley. Peculiar and annoying practice of having breakfast waiting on table before divers return from morning dive so that breakfast was always between lukewarm and cold. Also, for a boat that caters to Americans, attention to improving the coffee (which is instant, super-strong and awful) and changing the pre-breakfast (at 6:00 am. before the morning dive) from cookies and sugared cereal to fruit and toast or non-sugared cereal would be a welcome change. Divemasters Manik and Moosa are very knowledgeable, competent and helpful above and beyond the call of duty; every dive with them was not only fun but a learning experience as well. All in all, a great trip.

Manthiri, August 2001, Karen Uyeda (bsktcase@ncal.verio.com)
San Jose, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm currents. Our trip was great. Booked less than a month in advance and air reservations were touch and go. Nancy Chase handled it well. The accommodations on the ship are very good. The air conditioning worked (when we figured out how to turn off), water was plentiful — both drinking and showers. The double bed was comfortable and there was plenty of room to store luggage. The toilet in our room did act, but was handled efficiently and discreetly. Shower can get slippery! I fell and got a good gash in my side from hitting the paper holder in the bathroom. The crew was very good. They were quiet and shy. Manik the divemaster was enthusiastic!

He was on dive 4043. Breakfast was traditional American style — eggs, turkey ham, tasty sausages, French toast, toast and fruit were the staple. Lunch was American also — tuna sandwiches one day, fish pizza a couple of days. Ice cream for dessert. Nothing totally remarkable, but very good. Afternoon tea/coffee time was generally the cracker/cookie fare -- not too sweet. A couple of days we had toasted fish sandwiches. Also we had a spicy hummus type snack. I would have liked those all days! Dinner: chicken, fish and a beef dish. The fish was sometimes overdone, but was always good. Potato and rice or noodle dish, lettuce salad, tomatoes, cucumbers or a coleslaw. Dessert was fruit — generally mango or pineapple. You hand your gear to a crew member on the dive tender and they are very conscientious. The cameras get a freshwater dip after a dive. Workspace might be tight if there are many photographers on the ship. The diving was good. Water was 82 deg. F. The fish life is immense! We saw many eels — sometimes 2 in one hole! Many sharks and eagle rays, one stingray. Turtles were plentiful. Triggerfish and anemone fish were plentiful. The viz was only 50 feet at best. The coral is very damaged, but it is recovering in many areas. The soft corals are doing well. Sometimes the current was challenging. Trips to the villages: I was not comfortable with the shop owners trying to get you to come into their shops. The city tour was interesting. It was well worth the time to get to the Maldives and well worth the cost.

RED SEA

Red Sea Aggressor, April 2001, John and Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com) Carbondale, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm. Wanted both the North and South itineraries so we booked back-to-back trips when they switch from a Sharm El Sheikh departure to Hurgadah. The “Excel” now the Red Sea Aggressor is a splendid boat with roomy cabins with AC that worked, lovely salon, and dining areas, and a functional dive deck. Captain Ramy Refaat, who is owner, insured that everything ran smoothly. Only 10 divers. Colorful anthias everywhere, anemones were all over the place teeming with playful anemone fish, plenty of nudibranchs, lion fish; and we were introduced to the Arabian angelfish, Red Sea raccoon butterfly fish, and redback butterfly fish. Huge eels and blue spotted rays were common. We “danced” with a bright red Spanish dancer. Lush forests of hard and soft coral. We dived several wrecks, but the most spectacular was the Thistlegorm containing its cargo of motorcycles, trucks, and other war material. Starfish, anemones, big eel, nudibranchs, cup coral, and lion fish. Rasom Sid: parades of fish gathered as the evening approached. At the end of the week, we expected to remain on the boat for the crossing to Hurgadah. However, nobody from the Aggressor office had informed the boat. We had a few uneasy moments before it was decided to “hide” us in our cabins in case the boat was inspected during the