

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

departure. Apparently, there was some prohibition to taking “passengers” across the Red Sea to the other port that is a different district. The second week we enjoyed a variety of dives on the way to the Brothers Islands where we were challenged with high voltage diving. Most diving was from two inflatable dinghies that carried divers to a drop off spot and picked them up after “drifting” along the wall. This worked fine as long as the dinghy took divers back to the big boat in shifts, but not so fine if the divers had to wait for the last divers to surface. Just please let us do our dives and don’t complain; all divers are not equal when it comes to utilization of air. And, who ever said that all divers should use the same style? Some buddies like to “hug” each other throughout the dive, others, like we do, prefer to have a looser “relationship.” That’s OK, especially if you are diving with a pony. The crew staged a delicious and fun buffet and offered a video and slide show reviewing the week’s activities. At the end of the second week, we had a dinner at the dockside Hurgadah Sheraton that featured an Egyptian feast and a folkloric music and dance performance. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; fax 985-384-0817; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Red Sea Aggressor, June 2001, Sharna Kahn
(ToDive4@Compuserve.com)
Oakland, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy currents. Captain

Ramy Rafat and his son Achmed were humorous and professional. Their years of experience were a plus. Crew was exceptional. The cabins were large, each with a private head. The cook, Dalal, was creative and turned out delicious meals, although the selection was repetitive. The dining room was comfortable. Well stocked main salon where I spent many a surface interval napping, reading, watching videos and editing photos! The diving in the central/southern part of the Red Sea is around coral bommies in blue water. Brothers: parrot, wrasses, anthias, lion, coral and moon grouper. One hammerhead. Pipe fish and banded shrimp were plentiful. Not overly impressed with the abundance of marine life or coral health compared to Indonesia or the Caymans. The corals looked as if they had suffered some die off. The Salem Express wreck, sunk ten years ago, was not very encrusted. South point of the leeward reef of Big Brother, I was caught in a down current and was separated from the group. Diving on Nitrox 32% I began to get nervous at 91 feet with a full BCD and still heading down. My hand was on my weight belt and I was ready to ditch my camera gear when suddenly I was at 71 feet and rising rapidly. Dumped the BCD air and splayed arms and legs. Stabilized at 50 feet in blue water and stopped to assess my direction and slow my spasming heart! I was y alone until I did a slow 180 and saw the group disappearing around the leeward side of the bommie. Checked my air, relaxed and finished my dive. I needed a windbreaker/sweatshirt when

I was on deck and wet. On land, you swelter. The last night in Hurghada the boat was restocked and repaired for the next trip. The noise level was deafening and the air conditioning was not functioning. The cabins were noisy ovens. It was impossible to sleep. The captain and staff had departed so we couldn't get a resolution. Camera tables are outside on the main deck. Although there is some shade, the wind is usually a problem with film cans and lens caps flying away. If the boat had been full and everyone had a camera, space would have been cramped. Fresh water rinse tanks are convenient as you come back aboard from the stern of the boat.

Red Sea Aggressor), July 2001, John Duggan (DugganDive@aol.com) San Antonio, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 to 80 F, calm. 10 day shore excursion and then the cruise in the Southern Red Sea. Fabulous. Security on the land in Cairo, Giza and Luxor was tight. Thoroughly enjoyed the trip. The skipper (Ramey), Divemaster (Karim) and Aggressor Reo (Allen) did everything they could to ensure UWP's got chances to video clownfish laying and fertilizing eggs and lionfish mating behavior.

Red Sea Aggressor, July 2001, Mark Mintz (H20mark-1@att.net), Cape Coral, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F, calm. Cabins were clean with twins beds. No hot water. The towels were supposedly changed every 3rd day. Some of our group had a leaky toilet that was promised to be fixed

and never was. The color of the water coming out of the faucets was never clear. Middle Eastern cuisine and flavors and plenty of food. The coral (except the Brothers Islands) had been attacked by crown of thorns and devastated a lot of site. Hard to set up photos with fish with a satisfactory background. The Brothers islands diving was excellent. The hard and soft corals were spectacular. The boat had blown an engine prior to our arrival and it took them over 3 days to fix which cut our time to go South. Cavalier attitude of the divemasters and lack of attention to small safety details. One diver was under the boat preparing to surface when they started the engines. One of the engines was engaged and in reverse which could have sucked her into the prop if she did not swim like hell. All, except 2, were using Nitrox and diving accordingly. We found out the crew was filling their tanks not marked Nitrox with Nitrox. This could have been a real disaster. When we returned to port Friday, two locals were hired to help reprovision the boat. When my cabin mate returned to our cabin he found one locals going through my bag. He had stolen several objects from almost all the cabins but we caught him. Ample space for photographers but we were crowded for space with approximately 12 of the 18 passengers were shooting film. They had advised us that the boat was strictly 220 volts yet some of our passengers had no voltage converters and they had to scramble to share with those who had brought them. The rinse tank water was not changed daily. The crew were not camera savvy

and the rinse tank looked like a potential demolition derby at times.

Red Sea Aggressor, July 2001, Linda Gettmann, Camas, WA. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 82-84 F. Logged dives: 290. Went with Steve Frink and a group of traveling u/w photographers. The worst experience we have ever encountered in our 15 years of scuba diving around the world. The two men who met us at the Hurghada airport did not help while six of us wrestled with our baggage. After we got on the boat, we discovered that one of the engines was not working and we would need to alter our plans to accommodate the need to get mechanics in the hopes of getting it fixed so we could travel to the Brothers Islands. The engine problem persisted for three days and we were diving very poor sites close to shore with not much to see but dead coral. My nitrox tank apparently contained bad air, as half way through the first dive I got a severe headache and was nauseated. After being sick in my cabin, I was better the next morning and able to dive. Steve, Dan, Karim and others on board thought too much CO₂ must have been in the tank. The boat is not up to Aggressor standards. The toilet leaked all over the floor. It was never fixed. Water in shower and sink faucets in our cabin (#6) was a brown-red color all week long and the hot water was gone after one day. We couldn't shower in it, so took our showers on the back deck. Everyone used bottled water for tooth brushing and some even for camera washing because the water was so bad in

everyone's cabin. Karim said the system needed to be repaired. Mid-week Dan processed two batches of E-6 film and they came out with a brown film all over them. Steve Frink figured out a way to re-wash the transparencies and get rid of most of it. By that time, we had been diving sub-standard reefs, three of the 15 divers had been sick one or more days, and now our film wasn't being processed properly. A mutiny was imminent. Just when things looked darkest, the engine was repaired and we took off for the Brothers Islands. At the Brothers, we were among no fewer than 5 boats every day, and two serious life-threatening mistakes took place. I was in the water at 15' at the back of the boat waiting for the dinghy to quit running behind the boat so I could surface and climb up the ladder. The engine was started on the boat and the prop was engaged in reverse pulling me backward into the turbulence. I kicked as hard as I could and got out away from the prop on the starboard side of the boat. I saw the bilge pumps pumping brown liquid into the sea. The dinghy was again running back and forth behind the boat so I could not surface. I was able to get to the ladder and climb up after they turned off the engine. It probably ran for 30 seconds to a minute, but it scared me to death. The crew apologized for this mistake, except Achmed, who denied it happened. This could have been fatal and was the result of poor communication on board all week and the apparent lack of someone in charge. Achmed, Karim, and Dan all appeared to be "in charge" at some

point during the week, however the lack of English-speaking crew members and the lack of attention to safety put us all at risk. On one of the last dives, two divers discovered that the crew was filling their “air” tanks with Nitrox. We don’t know if that had been happening all week. They were certainly not diving Nitrox profiles, and this error could have caused serious injury. Back at port in Hurghada they “hired” two people off the dock to help with the restocking of the vessel. Once on board, the two began burglarizing everyone’s cabin. Stealing cell phones, cameras, money, and other items from several cabins, they were chased down the pier and caught by two of the Egyptian crew members. All the items were returned, however this seemed to be the final outrage of an outrageous week. Karim and Dan did their best to make things right and apologized every day for what was going on. Dan indicated that the reason he was on board was because the Excel wasn’t up to Aggressor standards and he was there to change things. There is no method for determining who is in the water and who is on board. We were asked to keep a nitrox log and a dive log up in the salon during the week, but there was no method down on the dive deck to know who was in the water and who wasn’t. It would have been very easy to have left someone at a dive site with the type of “individual photographer” diving that was going on all week. The crew did their best to be prompt in picking up divers in the dinghies and we all appreciate their efforts in sometimes rough seas.

M/Y Greta, July 2001, E.J. Delaura, Washington Township, NJ. Vis: 75-125 ft. Water: 82-88 F. Logged dives: 200+. Dive trip was planned based on the promise of accommodations aboard the M/Y Sea Serpent, a brand new diving vessel. If for any reason the Sea Serpent was not available, the Miss Veena was to be substituted. Without notification, the M/Y Greta was to be our live aboard since all the necessary permits had not been obtained for the Sea Serpent. The Miss Veena had been chartered by another group. The Greta was old and hot. The air conditioning was hardly effective. The toilets did not accommodate toilet paper which resulted in a nauseating smell. The boat sailed the southern route stopping at Safaga, The Brothers, and Elfinstone. After Safaga the waters became quite choppy. Dive briefings indicated where the dive would begin, anticipating the direction of the current, with an alternate dive plan for a wrong guess. A number of the guesses were wrong. The crew was friendly and helpful and the food was good as well. Dining room was warm on a number of occasions due to the ineffective air conditioning. By the last day the boat had indeed run out of fresh water. Fortunately, after a battle of wills with management staff, Diving World provided day rooms at the Hurghada Marriott for those passengers with a late flight out of Hurghada. (Ph/ fax 0020 65 447307 / 448036; e-mail Hamed@SeaSerpentFleet.com; website <http://seaserpentfleet.com>)

M/V Legend, Diamond Sea Dive Center, July 2001, Fran Macintyre

(jennienik@netzero.net) Albuquerque, NM. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm no currents. Diving was fantastic! But lots of problems. No effort was made to find out our interests were or to cater to our numerous photographers. Hamada told me that he was just plain bored with diving week after week, diving the same dive sites, dealing with tourists. The DM's would not slow down so we could look closely at the reef and fish life. I'm sure there was a huge amount of small critters that we could have seen if only we'd been allowed to slow down and look. Two women went into deco dives by following Hamada instead of watching their computers, and I was told to "ignore my computer and follow him" because "he knows the dive profile." He also told me he only did safety stops on the deeper dives. I chose to dive according to the Padi standards I've been taught. The surface of the dive deck was as slippery as ice. Many guests fell as did several of the crew members. One crew member, upon slipping at the bottom of a ladder, just rolled up into a ball and skidded towards the back of the boat like a bowling ball, nearly taking out several guests along the way. For over two days, whenever we would touch two surfaces at the same time, we would receive varying degrees of a shock. We were told that it was normal for that to occur in the Red Sea since everything was so wet. When the dinghy driver was filling the gas tank, using his hands as the funnel, he sloshed a great deal of fuel on the bottom of the boat. After our

visit to a "scenic" island, 13 guests and 2 crew members squeezed into the dinghy. It was dark and our dinghy driver had no idea how to get back through the shallow reef, so he ended up running us aground several times. We began taking on water, and began bailing like crazy with the only bucket on board. The motor stalled. While attempting to restart the motor, a spark flew into the fuel on the surface of the water in the dinghy and we were suddenly on fire. Imagine 14 instant and perfectly executed back rolls into the water, along with the dinghy driver being thrown from the top of the burning motor. We landed in water and not on the coral and sea urchins that were close by. The only injuries were a couple of flash burns on legs, a couple of scratches, and one very shook up dinghy driver. A dinghy from another dive boat anchored nearby had already started out to us when the dinghy caught fire and was perfectly positioned to pick us all up. Hamada, upon seeing his divers flying out of the dinghy and his dinghy on fire, swam to our rescue..... straight across the shallow reef. He got some nasty injuries from the sea urchins he swam into. kept asking about air conditioning on the boat and our shop kept receiving assurances from the dive operator that we would have A/C. No, we did not have air conditioning at all. Most everyone slept out on the deck and we were pretty comfortable. But during the day, it was brutally hot in between dives. The only compressor was not big enough to handle filling the tanks and run the A/C at the same time. It took over two hours to

fill the tanks for 17 divers. There were no extra tanks aboard, so we just had to wait. That's also why we did not get the promised 4 dives per day. They ran out of bottled drinking water 24 hours before we were due to head back into Hurghada. The crew begged, borrowed (and stole?) a mere 12 bottles from other boats. No care was given to our cameras when we came out of the water; cameras were put down on the deck with fins, masks and other assorted dive gear. No rinse tanks were available for cameras or other gear, and the "fresh water" rinse was usually rusty colored. (Ph/fax 20 65 548597 (Egypt); e-mail info@RedseaDiamond.com; website <http://redseadiamond.com>)

Ghazala I, Sinai Divers, August 2000, Petra Israel, Annapolis, MD. Vis: 100-150 ft. Water: 78-82 F. The coral gardens are the most fertile I've ever seen. Photo ops are endless an amazing. Ghazala I was disappointing. The captain was rude and insulting. The service was the worst I've encountered. There was no hot water for showers and only 1 towel was issued the entire week. Dive profiles were poorly followed by the dive master. (Ph: 002069-600697 (Egypt); fax 002069-600158 (Egypt); e-mail info@sinaidivers.com; website www.sinaidivers.com)

Miss Veena, September 2000, Deena Evans, Los Altos Hills, CA. Departing from Hurghada, Egypt. The boat was scheduled to dive The Brothers, Rocky Island, Zabargad, St. John's, and other deep south sites. Some beautiful reefs with lovely hard and

soft coral. Abundant small fish life, typically the anthias, hovering around the reef, saw one large manta, a white tip reef shark 3-4 times, and some saw a hammerhead or two if they went deep). Lots of free swimming morays, a few octopi, a number of turtles, pipe fish and lots of scorpionfish and lion fish. Several cave type swim-rounds/overhangs that were exceptional. A juvenile crocodile fish was totally mesmerizing. The water was 79 degrees in the northern part and 82 degrees in the southern part. Some sites with strong current, but it was current free most of the time. Normal to have anywhere between 3-8 other live-aboards parked at a site. Old timers expressed disappointment in how the area had been "ruined" while the divemaster regaled us with descriptions of some awesome encounters with big stuff just weeks before; the point being that currents and thermoclines greatly influence what you are going to see. Miss Veena really isn't a dive boat, the owner has put some tank holders on the back and is now calling it a dive boat. It was a very uncomfortable boat, no "soft" places to relax, no chairs on the sky deck, only straight-backed cushions in the salon. the dive deck could have comfortably provided space for a maximum of 10, but we had 20. The Nitrox blender was absent so no Nitrox. No camera table and a pitiful garbage can for a rinse bucket for the cameras. Cabins 1, 3, 4, and the hallway were often uninhabitable due to fumes from the holding tank. Cabin 3 dripped water from the ceiling causing the mattresses to soak. We had

hot water in the showers 4-5 days. The food was initially good, (except the beef, which was inedible). Although very cute, the cook was not creative. We had the same food day after day after day with the main dish changing. Frozen peas, frozen French fries, etc. The feta cheese and tomatoes were fantastic. The oatmeal was the best! Snacks between dives were boxed Egyptian cookies, until we ate them all. One smart diver brought Snickers! These saved me from axe murdering several of the other divers. The captain allowed the automatic dumping of the holding tanks into the water while divers were going in and out of the water, despite repeated complaints. Swimming to the boat through raw sewage happened 4-6 times. The dive deck crew was friendly and helpful. The divemaster was good. His assistant had never been to many of the sites. One towel for each guest, to be used as your bath towel and dive deck towel! This was changed after the 4 or 5th day. Cabins were not cleaned nor made up. There was a change of the top flat bed sheet midway through the trip. We did have bathrobes that became the dive deck towel for many, however mine blew away one night when underway. The boat, by the second week, was truly filthy. Food bits on the floors, runners on the buffet table stuck to the wood due to spilled food never cleaned up — truly disgusting. In the cabins there was a closet, but no hangers so the space was lost. There was a refrigerator in the room that ended up being a storage space for clothes in my room. No drawers under the beds, no

shelves. Amazing they're calling it a 5 star luxury dive yacht! We started out with 2 zodiacs, but the engine went out on one of them about 2 way through the trip and then all 20 divers had the use of one zodiac with a 25 horsepower motor. Although I'm whining, I had fun. Most of the divers on the boat were fun and interesting. Most of us got a little sick at one time or another, but nothing serious. (Ph/fax 0870 44 303 11 (Egypt); e-mail info@Redseadivers.com; website www.redseadivers.com)

Wildcat, March 2001, Keith Montgomery, Tulsa, OK. Vis: 15-18 meters. Water: 72 F. less. I booked direct. Upon arriving, we found we were the only guests for the trip. Thus we got a private tour of the Northern Red Sea. I was even able to book a personalized one-day Cairo trip (museums, pyramids, shopping) on the way back. Conditions: cool water (72F); moderate air temps (72 to 80F); visibility ok (15-18 meters). I had hoped for better vis but about average this time of year; surface conditions not bad a little rough one day. Facilities: boat was very good. My buddy took the master stateroom and really liked it. Obviously not crowded (max 14, but just us plus crew — a full passenger limit on this boat would be crowded). Food great with sufficient variety (Connie did a wonderful job with the cook on vacation). Crew did their jobs well. Rooms kept clean; fresh towels. Service was very good and when my buddy had an ear problem they got him right to the doctor at Sharm. Diving: very nice.

Less stony and more soft coral than I thought; great Fish life. Huge Napoleon wrasses (four), two large turtles, lots of lionfish, large schools of anthias. On a night dive a Spanish dancer, octopus, lots of lionfish following us. No sharks fewer pelagics than hoped for. The dive master Carmen ("Cuckoo") did a good job picking sites and provided good briefings. Personal favorites were the Straits of Tiran (Thomas, Jackson, Woodhouse Reefs) and Dunraven wreck. Thistlegorm is definitely at the limits of recreational diving and has big crowds of day boats and live-aboards that show up within an hour of each other. I wonder about safety on this wreck with all the boats tying up to the wreck. Saw two boats run into each other. While an enjoyable and interesting dive, it is for the experienced diver and sometimes conditions are difficult. Carmen and the crew did a good job getting us to the more popular sites early so we often finished dives as the day boats were arriving. Diving was mostly from the Zodiac. Only once did we have to wait a few minutes for a pick up. Got in over 20 dives. Could have done more but you have to rest sometimes. Some tremendous diving sites with something for all. Good value. (Ph: +202.735.3111; fax +202.735.8697; e-mail petrome@link.net; website www.redseadiving.com)

THAILAND

Andaman Seafarer, PIDC Divers,
February 2001, Bill Brennan,

Chicago, IL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, calm currents. Four-day cruise to Similan Islands and Richelieu Rock. Good vis (50-100 ft.), warm water (85 F), moderate to strong current on most dives. Not for beginning divers. Variety and abundance of marine life on almost all dives. Richelieu Rock — incredible soft corals, profuse anemones, outrageous animals (huge octopus, lionfish, etc.). Our captain was knowledgeable about the dive sites and currents, managing to get us there at optimal times (always three or four other live-aboards at each site). As the price (\$600 or \$720 per person for the four-day cruise, depending on accommodations) suggests, don't expect Aggressor-type amenities. One towel for the entire trip, No E-6 processing. Boat holds 14 passengers in cramped cabins (two quads, three doubles), and everyone, including the crew, shares two heads with barely adequate showers and primitive Thai-style toilets. Heads are a deck and a half up from the cabins, so during the night be prepared to negotiate stairs in the dark. Air-conditioning in the cabins was on only at night or when the boat was underway. There's no ventilation in the cabins, making them virtually uninhabitable when the AC isn't on. Breakfast area on the spacious dive deck, and a dining area on the mostly covered sundeck. No chaises and no indoor lounge/salon. Food, prepared by a cheerful Thai cook, was quite good. Custom-cooked eggs, along with bacon and toast, for breakfast; delicious Thai dishes for lunch