

to Americans as you could hope to find anywhere (and certainly more so than most other countries).

**Sea Safari III, May 2002, John Sommerer**  
(john.sommerer@jhuapl.edu) **Silver Spring, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 15 to 80 Feet. Water: 65 to 82 F, calm currents no currents. Very spacious and comfortable boat, especially with light load. Service very good, food excellent and plentiful. Boat crew spoke little English, but were friendly and helpful. Maintenance an issue: peeling varnish; slow drains; satellite phone not functional; engine failure that cost us a day of steaming while crankshaft and bearings replaced; some rental dive gear with problems. Diving excellent, with good briefings. Flexible schedule responsive to diver preferences. Divemasters for this trip Sascha (an owner) and Graham Abbott were both great at critter spotting. Typically four dives per day, including a night dive. We did five at Rinca, when the boat didn't need to be moved. Currents quite changeable. Huge variability in vis and temperature between north and south part of Komodo Park. Land excursions very worthwhile. Saw lots of dragons in Komodo, and visited a small village in east Bali for their annual Barong dance. Crew needs to be more careful with cameras. Frequently loaded cameras in wrong tender. Three guests' cameras damaged.

### Northern Sulawesi

**M/S Symphony-Murex, September 2002, Jerry (JerryL3515@aol.com)**  
**Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: Over

1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, currents. We spent two weeks on *M/S Symphony* — a basic boat with three reasonably comfortable cabins — air-conditioned but they turned it on only at night. The dive deck is spacious and workable with an excellent ladder for reboarding. There is no inside lounge and meals are taken topside under a canopy. The dining area was spacious and the service was good. Food is basic, hot and plentiful. Fish, chicken, pork and rice. Diving and pickup was done both from the boat and from an inflatable. The inflatable had no ladder and the mounting of the oars made getting in and out clumsy. Diving is fantastic in Northern Sulawesi. Beautiful reefs, coral untouched by El Niño and abundant sea life make this one of our favorite places in the world. The boat went where we wanted when we wanted. We did four dives a day but could have added a fifth had we wanted. The current on some dives was strong and unpredictable. The divemaster "Big Opo" made everything happen. One battery charging station. No camera storage, except in stateroom. (Ph: 62-431) 826091; e-mail info@manado-liveaboards.com; website www.manado-liveaboards.com)

### MALDIVES

**Manthiri, October 2001, Barbara & Larry Murphy (lemurphy@aol.com)** Atlanta, GA. Cruised the north Male atolls for two weeks. Many reefs are showing slight signs of hard coral recovery after the El Niño of

'97-'98. Reef tops have been reduced to rubble. A typical dive site is a pinnacle where the multilevel dive begins at 60-100' in current to watch cruising sharks, tuna, trevalley and jacks. A reef hook would be helpful. Shallower, the cast changes to turtles, Napoleon wrasse, eagle and manta rays. We witnessed a dolphin chasing a huge barracuda. Reef tops feature tame turtles and great schools of medium and small fish. Visibility was low because of the plankton that attracts whale sharks and mantas, and the mantas were around in squadrons. Though we never found Mr. Big, there were numerous impromptu opportunities to snorkel with the mantas and to see them while diving. The fish life is so prolific that one almost forgets about the state of the hard corals. The *Manthiri* has the best crew of any we've experienced on eight other live-aboards. Cabins are comfortable, each with individual a/c controls and ensuites. Diving is from a dhoni, a Maldivian style boat that follows the *Manthiri*. They fill tanks on the dhoni and all dive equipment kept there. There were usually four daily dives unless cruising distance cuts it to three. Night dives were offered throughout the trip but were not too exciting. Camera work is done in a large air-conditioned salon that features comfortable, overstuffed sofas and chairs. There are many charging stations, but if all 12 passengers were camera carriers, space would be tight. E-6 processing is available. Food was above average. Upon return from our trip we had an *Undercurrent* e-mail alerting us to the

bankruptcy of Tropical Adventures, our travel agent for the *Manthiri*. It seemed the promised rebate for filling the boat would not materialize from Tropical Adventures. However, when the *Manthiri's* owner learned of the problem, he refunded out of his own pocket about 1/3 of what each person could have expected from Tropical Adventures. A note about entering the Maldives — all luggage is x-rayed upon entry. Our friends had videos seized though none was even slightly risque (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, for example). Supposedly the videos would be sent to a Muslim review board for viewing, and if approved, returned in a few months. Don't bring any alcohol. It won't be returned. You can buy a bottle on the boat. (Ph: 877-357-0022 (US) or 960-325634; e-mail [seansee@dhivehinet.net.my](mailto:seansee@dhivehinet.net.my); website [www.manthiri.com](http://www.manthiri.com))

***Manthiri*, October/November 2001, Jim N. Parkhill (scuba7056@aol.com) Edinburg, TX.** Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 80-83 F. Dives logged: 525. Dive restrictions enforced: 60 minutes per dive. Trip Maldives perfectly meet my criteria of what a real paradise should be: An endless chain of uninhabited islands, each more perfect than the last. Pristine white sand beaches adorned with swaying palms. Fringing reefs surrounded by waters ranging over the full spectrum of blues and greens. Sunny days and starry night skies punctuated by a full moon. Sweet natured people. World class diving. Our group booked a special 14 day itinerary that would cover the less

frequently dived northern atolls. Over 13 diving days, a total of 44 dives were offered, nine of which were either night or transition dives. When we could work in up to four dives, the schedule would be 7 A.M., 11AM, 3PM and an in-at dusk-out-at dark dive or a night dive. *Giris* — shallow pinnacles, usually lying within the protected inner atoll. *Tilas* — deep pinnacles, lying either within or outside the fringing islands and reefs of the atoll. *Kandus* — deep channels between two islands forming the outer perimeter of the atoll. *Fahrus* — Walls along the outer, ocean side of the fringing islands. *Farus* — Submerged reefs along the fringing islands. *Fushis* — Exposed reefs along the fringing islands. Currents varied from none to ripping. The channel dives on an outgoing or incoming tide always presented challenging currents but usually offered up the best variety of marine life. All dives were basically drift dives. Difference in visibility depending upon the site. Time of year for the heaviest concentrations of plankton and the best odds of encountering whale sharks. Seven dives with mantas, all close encounters at length. At *Berian Faru* on *Raa Atoll* we were entertained by two circling mantas for over 30 minutes. At *Faimini Tila* on *Baa Atoll* one manta literally ran over Norm, a dive buddy. At *Don Fan Tila* on *Baa Atoll*, one manta wove its way in and out of patrolling silver tip sharks and another circled under me during a long safety stop. Snorkeled with 21 mantas for 40 minutes of a manta ballet with the mantas often coming within touching range. I have

several video segments of up to nine mantas coming straight at me single file, mouths agape, then peeling off in front of me at the last moment. The greatest spectacle I have ever witnessed diving. The mantas never left us. Half the dives had significant shark activity, including numbers of *Silver Tip* sharks. We usually saw these big guys on the channel dives in strong current. There were also plenty of black tips, white tips and grey reef sharks. The last dive of the trip at *Vella Wall* on *S. Male Atoll* served up a 15-foot *Thresher* shark. Near *Male*, a whale shark was sighted but was gone before the crew could get the boat in place. School of eagle rays at *Finger Point* in *N. Male*. Numerous marble rays paraded around the *Veli* wreck dive on *Ari Atoll*. At *Ifuru Tila* on *Raa Atoll*, I followed a slow swimming blue spotted ray into a long, narrow tunnel, when it suddenly turned around and came back toward me. I rolled to let him pass but the cramped confines still required us to brush against one another. Turtles on half the dives. Some would calmly munch away at algae while the photographers surrounded them with strobes blazing away. Eels: green morays, snowflakes, zebras, reticulated and yellow margined. *Napoleon* wrasses on a third of the dives. Some were the size of a small refrigerator and were completely unperturbed by a diver's presence. The most vivid memory is the sheer abundance and variety of reef fish. The *Maldives* boasts over 700 species of fish. The tops of the reefs are an absolute circus of activity. Huge schools of yellow tail snappers,

Moorish idols, bigeyes, and bannerfish, clusters of Oriental sweetlips, batfish, surgeonfish, soldierfish and tangs, seven varieties of butterfly fish and at least four varieties of angels, trumpetfish, clown triggers, filefish, anemone fish, parrotfish, schools of silversides numbering in the thousands form opaque curtains. I was shocked at the condition of the hard corals. The hard coral may, indeed, be making a comeback as has been heralded, but it has a long way to go. A few sites that we dived had the appearance of a nuclear aftermath. The good news is that the soft corals have made the comeback, at least at many sites. There are caves and ledges with soft corals attached to the ceilings like inverted gardens. There are sites where multicolored soft corals cascade down the walls. Gorgonians, barrel sponges, tube sponges, anemones, hydroids and crinoids are not particularly profuse but they are to be found at most sites. The *Manthiri*, which was built in 1994, is 85 feet long and has a beam of 25 feet. She carries a maximum of 12 passengers in six cabins (four twins, two doubles). The cabins have individually controlled A/C, ensuite baths, a large closet and several drawers for storage. Ultra spacious and comfortable lounge that sports several sofas and stuffed arm chairs. There is a complete entertainment center and camera table with plenty of outlets for battery charging. Another smaller lounge area has a breakfast nook that doubles as a convenient camera working area. The sit down dining area is off to one side

of the lounge and consists of two tables for six people each. All of the diving is done off a 43-foot companion boat called a "dhoni." The compressors are on the dhoni so there is no compressor noise on the live-aboard. AU dive gear, except cameras, remains on the dhoni so there is no dive gear clutter on the live-aboard. A small rear deck on the *Manthiri* contains a fresh water shower and a camera rinse tank. The upper sundeck has both open and covered areas for lounging in either the sun or the shade. It is amply equipped with padded deck chairs and a clothesline. The crew will wash and dry clothes upon request. All meals are sit down affairs served by a waiter. There is a pre-dive mini breakfast served before the 7 A.M. dive, which consists of fruit, cereal, toast, etc. The early morning dive is followed by a full breakfast, which usually includes both eggs and pancakes or French toast along with ham, juice and fruit. Both lunch and dinners are hot meals. Dinner usually consists of at least two entrees (a meat and a fish) and sometimes with a pasta or curry dish as well. They serve rice with most meals and there is always a vegetable or two. Dessert is usually fresh fruit or ice cream. They serve wine with dinner at no charge. Beer and other alcoholic beverages are available at a charge. Bottled water is available at no charge on both the *Manthiri* and the dhoni. I found the food to be tasty, abundant and wholesome. *Manthiri* crew members fished while we dived, there was always the freshest of fish being served; primarily tuna, wahoo and

snapper. The Diving Protocol — all diving is done from the dhoni while the live-aboard remains in protected waters. Trips to the dive sites on the dhoni can range between 5-20 minutes. There are no depth limits established although there is no need to ever go beyond sport diving limits at any site. Computers are not checked or monitored. Buddy diving is not mandatory nor is following the dive master or diving as a group. The only limits imposed are that dives be limited to 60 to 70 minutes because of scheduling considerations. With the *Manthiri's* 94 cu. ft. tanks, virtually every dive becomes a 60 to 70 minute dive with air to spare. However, smaller 80s are also available. The three-man dhoni crew and the two dive masters take care of setting up tanks and assisting each individual diver into his gear. The crew hands cameras to the divers after they have entered the water. There are two large fresh water camera rinse tanks. The dhoni is covered by a canopy. Most dives are drift dives and with no requirement to stay with the group and varying bottom times, divers pop to the surface over a fairly wide area. However, the dhoni crew members have keen eyes and surface waits to be picked up are minimal. Safety sausages or First Alerts, though not mandatory, is only prudent. The crew consists of two DMs, the *Manthiri* captain, the engineer, two chefs, a waiter, a cabin boy, the dhoni captain and two dhoni assistants. This is hands down the most attentive and good-humored crew that I have found on a live-aboard. The dive masters, Manik

and Moosa, know their stuff. They will gladly take you on a tour or will let you do your own thing. Moosa and Manik, are whizzes at fixing broken gear and malfunctioning cameras and will stay up half the night to get a divers equipment up and running again. Moose processes E6 film onboard. The dhoni crew would regularly wash our wetsuits and hoods in fabric softener so that we never risked offending our bench mate. Part of one afternoon of the trip is set aside for a tour of atypical Maldivian village, one that most of the *Manthiri's* crew is from, they received us like royalty. Most Maldivian villages thrive on fishing but Inguraidho is a boat-building center. Most of the dhonis and native fishing craft plying Maldivian waters are built in this tiny village of 1,700 inhabitants. I was amazed to see that they were near completion of an 85-foot live-aboard sister ship to the *Manthiri*. The tour included visits to the homes of the crew where refreshments were served and where those more adventurous souls among us were invited to try beetle nut. The locals regaled us with their fishing chants and the primitive sounds of their ubodu beru drums. On my first trip, this event was strictly a “men only” affair, as one would expect in a Muslim society. Either Inguraidho is a more liberal village or the times are changing in the Maldives because this time the local ladies joined in the dancing enthusiastically. One night dinner was served on a beach rather than onboard the *Manthiri*. This was perhaps the most elaborate meal of the trip. There were

four entrees (baked whole fish, broiled chicken, spaghetti and meat sauce and a curry dish), an assortment of vegetables, four desserts, a selection of wines, cold beer and juices. At certain sites, the crew will take the dinghy to open water to fish while the guests are diving. Once, during our one-hour dive, the crew returned with two sailfish, a dozen tuna and a mess of wahoo and snapper. At the end of the trip, the *Manthiri* staff organizes a tour of Male. Although there is not a great deal to see of interest, it is a pleasant enough way to spend the day before the evening departure. Members of the *Manthiri* staff meet each diver at the airport and transport them via water taxi to the *Manthiri*. They handle all the baggage and see that it gets onboard and placed in the proper cabin. At the end of the trip, divers get off the *Manthiri* in the morning of the day of departure. Since most departing flights are late at night, The *Manthiri* puts the divers up in a day room at the Nusandua Palace Hotel in Male. Divers are free to spend the day shopping, resting or taking a tour of Male, which is provided by the *Manthiri* operators at no charge. In the evening, the *Manthiri* staff picks the divers up at the hotel, takes charge of all baggage and transports the divers to the airport by water taxi. The Maldives receive a little over 200,000 tourists a year, a quarter of whom are German and a fifth of whom are Italian. Other Europeans, South Africans and Japanese account for most of the rest of the visitors. There are two seasons in the Maldives: Dry (December -April); Rainy (May-

October). The diving seasons can be more specifically broken down as follows: Best: January-April Good: August - November (best time for mantas) Wet: May - July Best for Big Animals: January - March (time of most current) August - November. Although originally Buddhist, the Maldives converted to the Islamic religion in 1153. The society of the Maldives is pretty pervaded by the Sunnite Muslim culture and nobody questions the daily prayers, the Ramadan celebrations and the Koranic law. In other aspects, however, the Maldives appears more liberal than other Muslim cultures. The women don't wear veils and are much more integrated into society. Maldivians have a natural predisposition toward cheerfulness and optimism.

***Manthiri*, February 2002, James Lyle (jlyle@beachnet.com) Hermosa Beach, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, calm currents. Great boat but showing its age. The diving is done from a dhoni and your gear is kept there for the full cruise. The diving was wonderful and there was lots to see. The crew and DMs were attentive and helpful. The menu probably had too much fish for some people, but we were happy. Limited space for camera gear on the boat.

***Manthiri*, March 2002, Elisabeth Sykes, Farmington, NM.** Vis: 40-150 ft. Water: 84-86 F. Dives accrued: 300. Dive restrictions enforced: 130'. Great diving — lots of fish. Wonderful crew. Some areas covered with broken coral. Often strong

currents. Enjoyed visits to a couple of villages.

**Sea Spirit, Maldives Scuba Tours, [www.scubascuba.com](http://www.scubascuba.com), March 2002, Terry Anderson, Rose Eder.** 300+ dives each, our 4th live-aboard. Excellent, efficient English company who will help on all air tickets, and who arranged a trip for us to fascinating Sri Lanka. Reasonable prices with a new 80-foot boat, AC cabins, good fresh food, and a great crew. 12 divers in six cabins with two excellent, friendly and informative dive masters from Australia, Jason and Erica. Superb dive briefings. Must have computer and dive insurance, which company sells at a reasonable price, and then you can dive with the DMs or dive own profile with your surface flag, which they provide. Diving is world class, with more variety than Caribbean, Hawaii, Philippines, Thailand, Costa Rica, and even our favorites, Sipaden and Indonesia. Stone fish, leaf fish, scorpion fish, lion fish, white-tip, nurse, and gray sharks, dolphins, hawkbill turtles, and white-mouth, masked, and ribbon eels. Eagle rays, and at one "feeding station" we took pictures of seven large mantas for over an hour. Last afternoon spent in Male. (Ph: 44-1449-780220; e-mail [info@scubascuba.com](mailto:info@scubascuba.com); website [www.scubascuba.com](http://www.scubascuba.com))

## RED SEA

**Red Sea Aggressor "Excel," September 2001, Tom Harvey, Hillsdale, N.J.** I am an ironworker in N.Y.C. and just returned from a three-week trip to Egypt on September 9. On the 11th we

watched the towers collapse. My wife and I did a 10-day trip on the Red Sea Aggressor "Excel." It was great, the boat is an ideal dive vessel and the crew was professional. We did the "Brothers" itinerary going as far south as "Rocky" Island near the Sudan. The southern reefs are beautiful and 100% alive. It has been years since I have seen such pristine coral. The soft corals are every color and all the hard corals are untouched and full of fish. Great walls and a few encrusted wrecks. We also dived on the Salem Express that was a sad site — 1100 dead. Off Safaga was a site with more cooperative lion fish than I thought existed. The night dives were full of Spanish dancers and octopus. Capt. Ramy did everything he could and more to make our trip the best. No big fish — one hammer was all. I did three days of diving at Sharm. That is like diving on a N.Y.C. subway at rush hour. 250-300 divers on the Thislegorm. The park dives — Ras — Shark Canyon etc. are good but mobbed. The local sites are not worth the trip. Sharm marina is one of the world's wonders, the most crowded, confused mess I have seen. You must tie the trip into at least five days on land to see just the tip of Egypt. My fellow ironworkers and I spend 12-14 hours a day cutting up the same buildings we spent years erecting, a sad and dreadful experience and one that fills us as well as the rest of America with a profound feeling of emptiness and anger. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; e-mail [info@aggressor.com](mailto:info@aggressor.com); website [www.aggressor.com](http://www.aggressor.com))