

currents. Enjoyed visits to a couple of villages.

Sea Spirit, Maldives Scuba Tours, 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; website 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; website www.aggressor.com)

Red Sea Aggressor "Excel," October 2001, Robert & Gayle Bringas (RobertBringas@email.msn.com)

Gaston, OR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, no currents. Dove a northern itinerary. The corals not as impressive as the southern itinerary we did, but the fish life was better. Food was excellent. Boat not well maintained. Rusty water in cabins (water filters definitely overdo for changing). We had some safety concerns: life rings tied so securely to the rails you would have needed a knife to get one free, empty fire extinguishers. Tourism decimated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there were 4-20 boats at any given dive site. The itinerary is well within reach of day boats out of Sharm El Sheikh and there are a lot of them! Often we were returning from the second dive by the time the day boats arrived.

Red Sea Aggressor "Excel," October 2001, Thomas Sutherland, Kailua, Kona, HI. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 75-79 F. Dives logged: 178. Dive restrictions enforced: 130', 500 psi. One dive before breakfast, one dive after breakfast and lunch, one night dive, reluctant to supply divemaster if needed. For a live-aboard not good. Captain on vacation so his son ran the boat. Day dives were well planned and covered with crew. Food was excellent and plentiful. Quarters were clean and spacious. Problems, only four dives per day restrictions. Night dives very disappointing. First night I was only diver and was told to go alone (opted not to risk it). Second night two divers

with no divemaster or dive briefing supplied. Third night I was only diver and had to insist on crewman dive buddy to get someone ordered to go with me. Fourth night, everyone, captain — crew claimed ear aches and colds so that they couldn't go. 14 dives in five days is not live-aboard quality.

Oyster, October 2001, John Kendall (jkendall@altavista.net) Denver, CO. Vis: 80-100 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Dives accrued: 100. Just the four of us on a live-aboard booked for sixteen. Though it meant a loss, Khaled Samy sent the boat out anyway. Great accommodations. Took the best ideas from other live-aboards in building this one. Diving "The Brothers" highly recommended. Great small fish life and corals. Saw hammerhead, grey reef, thresher and silky sharks. Much fish live, beautiful reefs. (Ph: 20-2-3360255; e-mail Info@OysterDiving.Com; website www.oysterdiving.com)

Oyster, Five Star Travel, May 2002, Robyn and James Speicher and Martha Austin (Scubaphiles@link.net or austinml@yahoo.com) APO, AE. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 77 F, choppy surge currents. The *Oyster* out shined anything else we've been on in the Red Sea since we moved to Egypt. The crew was good. They were always there to assist divers with gear, getting in and out of the zodiacs, and handing out warm towels after dives. There was always someone on the dive deck to assist. Nitrox was available. The boat had oxygen, a good first aid kit,

and a satellite telephone for emergencies. Most diving was from zodiacs (the boat has two, so there was never a long wait to get picked up at the end of a dive) but there were sites where divers could enter and exit via the fantail. The Brothers Islands had seven other boats there besides ours; dive sites were not crowded and we rarely saw other divers in the water. Dive times were set by the crew and they were not flexible they promised four dives a day and that was what we got; surface intervals were often longer than necessary, possibly to avoid our requesting a fifth dive. While they allowed us to dive our computers to some extent, they did monitor depths and tried to keep everyone to 130 ft. Those who grossly violated those limits were made to sit out the next dive. A crew member accompanied each group into the water and kept an eye on everyone; however, they did not lead the dives. Egyptian law prohibits night diving at the Brothers Islands; consequently, we only made one night dive during the trip. The crew tried to arrange a second night dive the last night. However, local officials did not permit the dive. The Reefs at the Brothers Islands and Elphinstone were healthy, with abundant soft and hard corals. The fish life was abundant and varied — lots of juveniles and schools of fish, many varieties of sharks (we saw fifteen hammerheads on one dive, and gray reef sharks, white tips, and a thresher shark). We dove two wrecks; the *Numidia*, was as impressive for the coral growth on it as the dramatic position in which it

rests against the reef. Currents varied but tended to be strong, with a lot of surge and chop on the surface around the Brothers. The vessel holds 20 guests, though we were only 13. The cabins were comfortable, spacious, had lots of storage space, full baths and plenty of hot water and a/c. They changed linens and towels regularly and staterooms were cleaned twice a day. The salon area and the sun deck also had plenty of room. Meals were very good; the chefs accommodated special requests or dietary restrictions. Freshly made snacks between dives. Good supply of bottled water and sodas, and local beer and wine at average prices. Divers can bring their own alcoholic beverages. www.oysterdiving.com accurately reflects how we found the boat, and gives a virtual tour. When one diver had a badly cut finger, the crew immediately contacted the other boats in the area and found a German surgeon, sent the zodiac to get him, and he sutured the wound; our friend was diving again the next day. The crew (and booking staff) neglected to mention that the boat would not return to the same port from which we departed. While they had arranged for buses to transport us back to the starting port, we ended with an unexpected 3-hour bus ride. The *M/V Oyster* is a PADI and TDI certifying facility, and they offer classes on board and Nitrox certification. E-6 processing and a charging station with 110 and 220 voltages. It also has a good sound system with CD player and a multi-

system VCR. We enjoyed watching videos taken by our fellow divers as they plugged their cameras into the TV system.

Sea Serpent, October 2001,

Robert & Gayle Bringas

(RobertBringas@email.msn.com)

Gaston, OR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy surge. Corals were in excellent condition. Most of the crew were pleasant and helpful. Current on some sites; but nothing too strenuous. The London agent Diving World was difficult to work with. Took multiple e-mails to get answers. They gave the Hurghada office the wrong arrival information, so we were not met at the airport and had to discover where the boat was moored and make our own way to the marina. Divemaster Hassim was unfamiliar with Nitrox; took a two-day battle to convince him to get out his Nitrox books and show him that we didn't need to switch to air for repetitive dives! (From now on, we will take our own books with us.) The boat was supposed to be new as of July 2001; it definitely was not. The window in our outside cabin leaked from sea spray whenever the boat was under way. We dove the southern itinerary (Brothers, Daedalus, Elphinstone.) Expect at least 4-8 boats at any given dive site at any given time. (website www.seaserpentfleet.com)

REPUBLIC OF SEYCHELLES

Indian Ocean Explorer, November 2001, Walter Brenner, Wayne, PA.

Vis: 20-60 ft. Water: 77-78 F. Dives logged: 850. Seychelles is a 115-

island archipelago northeast of Madagascar stretching some 700 miles from Mahe in the North to Aldabra at the southern extremity. This was supposed to be a 2-week odyssey aboard the *Indian Ocean Explorer* covering the entire region. Unfortunately, the contrast between the dream and reality were enormous. A rust bucket built in the 50s, the boat's time for retirement has long since passed. From the start we 12 had to be put up in a hotel on Mahe for two days while the A/C (needed for the food cold locker) and generator were repaired. Parts had to be flown in from the UK. The two dives a day offered by the resort were pretty bad — terrible viz, and not lot to see except many rocks. When we finally got going, the cabin A/C was a sometime thing. They gave us little electric fans to clamp on the bunks. Terrible stench from the toilets and overall mustiness in the tiny cabins. I elected to sleep in the salon where I could stretch out and have some space for my belongings on my bunk. My cabin mate sprayed cologne to make it tolerable. Hot water was a rare commodity. The voyage was VERY rough especially without stabilizers. Waves were at least 20 feet high during two particularly bad 24 hour periods although this was supposed to be a good weather season. Food was so-so with a lot of potatoes, rice, and curry dishes. Little variety and flavor. They served fish often; the best thing was ice cream on occasion and wonderful crepes. I lost 5 pounds. David, the owner, had his hands full trying to keep a three-man TV crew happy while tending to the paying