

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

passengers. Without the patience to cope with the inevitable conflicts, he was in over his head. At first, the cameramen's every whim was catered to at the expense of the others — late starts, schedule changes, going to the best spots with them while the rest had to fend for themselves, a scarcity of information of what to expect the next day — or even the next hour — announcements of “let's go diving” without any warning. David seemed to resent any questions about what was going on. By the end of the first week or he had confrontations with just about everyone on the boat, when the passengers were ready to mutiny. At this point he did a complete about face and now the TV crew (doing a video for a German station) was left pretty much to its own devices and David could not have been more cooperative and attentive. The other divemaster was a young man who had never dived the area before. Instead of following along with David (not possible as HE had to attend to the TV crew), was not able to help the divers find the good stuff and on most dives he took off, leaving the others in his wake and was always first back in the dingy. We made stops at the islands of Desroches, Alphonse, St. Francois, North Island of Farquhar, Cosmoledos, Astove, and Aldabra. We encountered from 50 to 90% El Niño-related coral bleaching, with currents much of the time. Diving was from two rubber dinghies with no ladders. On a 1-10 scale the average quality was about 7. Some were really awful — terrible viz and little of interest in 78° water. A few were quite good,

especially the night dives-always the best. Some sharks — nurse and gray, a few sting and eagle rays, octopus walking about twice — that was great. Perhaps 10 nudibranchs, an African phyllidia, an elegant phyllidia, and an ocellated phyllidia were all new for me. The much touted current dives into and out of the Aldabra lagoon during tide changes were fun but that is about it. Many large potato “cod” and Napoleon wrasses but not like the minibus-size ones from the GBR or Palau. Abundance of turtles — hawksbill and green on every dive. Huge (15-18") Spanish dancers at least four color varieties from bright red to yellow! Astove offered the best dives with Aldabra a close second. Total number of dives for the two weeks was only 28. If it were not for the Island of Aldabra this would have been almost a complete waste. Aldabra is the largest above-water atoll in the world at 14 miles across designated a UN World Heritage Site in 1982. It can be reached by charter plane to the nearby island of Assumption at \$500 one way. The *Indian Ocean Explorer* is the only dive boat calling there. Like the Galapagos Islands, there are many indigenous species both beneath the waves and on land. About 120,000 giant tortoises have the run of the three islands making up the atoll, more than ten times the number found in the Galapagos. They are like military tanks plodding along in search of food or a cool spot to wait out the midday heat. Without hesitation they walk up to kneeling photographers and would sample the cameras if given the

chance. The terrain is covered mostly with scrubby brush and mangroves with little space for walking. Birds, like the flightless rail, the Aldabran fody, the brown noddy, and the dimorphic egret, are easy to spot. Huge rookeries of red-footed boobies and greater and lesser frigate birds abound in the mangroves. Coconut crabs march around in a businesslike manner eating anything and everything of interest including coconuts! Some are bright red and others, jet black. It would be foolhardy to get in their way with claws like “jaws-of-life” machines. These are the largest land crabs in the world. Without a doubt, the magical, almost Eden-like character of this place makes one feel as if sampling paradise. To make the long trek here merely for the diving does not make sense but I certainly do recommend it for the joy of experiencing a unique spot on our bustling planet where nature rules and we are merely fleeting observers. (Ph: 888-437-8456 or 352-401-5678; e-mail info@ioexplorer.com; website www.ioexplorer.com)

THAILAND

***Aqua One*, April 2001, Jon Bertsch and Rosemary Chengson, Oakland, CA.** Thailand - Similan Islands, Richlieu Rock, Burma. Viz 25-100 ft. Water: 80-86 F. Restrictions were “come back, preferably with some air” — nominally 130 ft but not enforced — be an adult. Dive Master Kom excellent at finding stuff. Cruise Director Johnny friendly, helpful and excellent guide. Tell them what you

want to see and they will try to make it happen. Good, accurate, site descriptions. Richlieu Rock was a little disappointing, may be fished out. Not a single whale shark on any boats in 2001 as of April according to the crew. While in Burma — stopped at a fishing village and visited a local temple. Diving is out of a pair of inflatables, back entry rolls and drift dives. Crew excellent at spotting you on the surface, safety sausage supplied if you don’t have one. Diving in Burma was great — OK Rock, Black Rock. Dives were sometimes in strong currents. Marble rays, leopard (spotted) sharks, manta rays, moray eels, huge group of squid at OK Rock (hundreds of them), large jellyfish. North Twin pretty much destroyed by blast fishing. Bull shark on one dive and a few reef sharks. Schools of cobia in the current. Just a few barracuda. Thailand diving was variable; over fishing has reduced number of fish but reefs are still intact in places. Manta rays, turtles, a small leopard (spotted) shark, morays, some beautiful soft corals. Currents were not too bad. Somewhat crowded with divers from other boats. Boat usually made the long haul trips at night or else they did their best to move to sites during surface intervals. Easy to do four dives a day, sometimes five. Food was a mix of excellent Thai and standard US-style, plenty of it and snacks available between meals. There is AC in all the cabins and decks, a sun deck and large shaded area on the upper deck. 120/240V for charging. Plenty of room for cameras. Video and music in the main cabin. Crew