

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

friendly and helpful. Picked up at the airport and taken straight to the boat to drop bags. (Ph: 66-2-6621417-8 or 66-2-2584592 (Thailand); e-mail aquaone@diver-aquasports.com; website www.diver-aquasports.com)

Aqua One, January 2002, Skip Harutun, Carbondale, CO. Dives logged: >1250. Vis: 60-90 ft. Water: 80-84 F. Dive restrictions enforced: No deco dives. Thousands of lion fish, scorpion fish, frog fish, two sea snakes, many varieties of clown fish, many cuttle fish, 10-15 sea horses, huge jelly fish, many ghost and harlequin ghost, pipe fish, nudibranchs, silver tips and leopard sharks. The two largest nurse sharks 10-12 feet I've seen at OK Rock. Nautilus shrimp, huge octopus plus beautiful soft coral. Heard fish bombs going off at Black Rock — bummer! Meals were good but not varied — Thai always! Sushi night was great! Need more English speakers on the boat. Johnny — the head man could get abrasive but was generally a good egg. Great trip, no need to repeat it though.

Aqua One, January 2002, Skip and Mary Harutun, Carbondale, CO. Vis: 60-100 ft. Water: 79-83 F. Dives logged: >1000. Dive restrictions enforced: 110 ft. Phuket — crowded (80 live-aboards?) We went north to Similian Islands (only saw another dive boat first and last day) then into Burma. Diving was great, not many large pelagics, heard “fish bombs” one day, sharks two huge, 12-15 nurse sharks, leopards, white tips, mantas one day. Combine this trip with 5-7 days land excursions (elephants,

mountains, temples, beaches, night life etc.) Johnny, the boss, was too “East coast” for me but helpful if pressed. Needs to be more English proficient staff members beside Johnny. Food was good but “total Thai all the time became tiresome.”

Aqua One, January 2002, Ed Heimiller (heimiller@att.net) Streamwood, IL. Vis: 25-50 ft. Water: 74-81 F. Dives logged: 4000+. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. depth limits. A modified US oil crew boat. In upgrading, they missed two major items. Sound proofing the cabins so divers can think and sleep when the engines are running. Adequate ventilation below decks so that you do not have a sewer gas smell in the rooms, bathrooms and hallways. The boat has two grades of cabins (Master and Deluxe) but Deluxe cabins are the same as standard on any other live aboard and are on the lower level. The main deck, which contains the dining area and dive deck. The upper deck is where the camera tables are. A typical day started with a light breakfast (cereal, toast, juice and coffee) at 7:00 a.m. followed by a dive briefing at 7:30 a.m.. The dive briefings were a laugh, literally as John the American captain/divemaster was burned out. He could not draw a map of the area with the correct directions (North, South, East or West) on it or the correct direction of the current, which you could tell by looking over the side. The dive was then conducted most of the time from Zodiacs. After the dive, about 9:00 a.m., they serve the main breakfast

buffet style. It consists of some western food and Thai food. They serve most foods at room temperature. After a rest, there was another dive briefing, then a dive about 11:00 a.m.. lunch was served at 12:30 p.m. and usually consisted of western foods. After a rest and a dive briefing, it was dive time again. This was followed by a "You guessed the snack food," rest and possible another dive about 4:00 p.m.. An evening dive was provide on several days; the boat usually spent the night in a sheltered cove. The diving is mainly for macro photographers and this includes Thailand and Burma. There are some sharks and manta rays but most large fish have been or are being taken by local fisherman. Though the dive sites are National Parks, the fishermen are using explosives to fish with. A fisherman using these methods awaked us one morning. We started the dives with the Similan Islands (#5, Deep Six, Breakfast Bend, Kon Bon-N, Kon Bon-S and Koh Tachai). Sandy bottom with coral heads or boulder fields. Juvenile fish, clown fish, lionfish, sweepers an occasional ray. After these dives, the other guest persuaded the captain to move to Richelieu Rock, where you had to dodge divers from all the other dive boats and handle the current that varied from dive to dive. This location was rich in macro photography, shrimp colonies, carpet anemones with clown fish, eels, soft corals, bi-halves, lion fish, scorpion fish, sea horses, pipe fish, harlequin shrimp and more. We made four dives there on the way to Burma and stopped again on our

way home. In Burma we dove Silvertip Bank twice at which we had a half-hearted attempt and a shark feed. From there we went to Black Rock for four dives. The marine life was more plentiful here as we saw sharks, eels, scorpion fish, crabs, cuddle fish, cowry snails and manta rays. A Brides Whale circled the boat a couple of times. The next stop was OK-Rock which is a pinnacle with a tunnel through it and noted for it sharks. The gray reef sharks swim through the tunnel and around the pinnacle. The tunnel is also home to a nurse shark and a ray. After four dives here we went to Big Rock where we saw a golden sea horse, baby scorpion fish, a school of squid and a sea snake. We then head back to Phuket with a short stop to sightsee at the entry/exit point to Burma.

Atlantis X, January 2002, Peter Larsen, Arko, 5455. Experience: 25 dives. Some 100 kilometers west of Thailand's south central coast are nine small reminders that life is beautiful: the Similan Islands. The smallest is not much bigger than a restaurant, with the largest perhaps the size of a university campus. Scattered among them are numerous rocks rising just enough to stir the surface. Seen from different angles they take on shapes, as do clouds, like gibbons and pachyderms and sharks, and are named accordingly; Monkey Face Point, Elephant and Shark Fin Rock, and more. Thick jungle growth blankets the islands, which are uninhabited besides two ranger stations, and fully outfitted campsites

for those willing to rough it. The islands have been given a 130 square kilometer National Park buffer. Thailand has a system of airports and shuttle services that allow the hurried American diver to hit numerous sites, hundreds of miles apart, during the same week's vacation. Phuket, snuggled against the Thailand coast, operates with all the amenities a traveler could ask for while keeping its unique Thai culture. Lodging choices are wide ranging in both space and style. I chose Patong Beach Atlantis live-aboards Dive Center, and its dive boat *Atlantis X*. There are many formulas that the different dive companies have experimented with — some for better, others for worse — including *Atlantis* live-aboards. The system of transporting supplies, divers and equipment between the dive center, hotels and bungalows, the shores and the boat were highly coordinated. Of the 12 other divers on board *Atlantis*, seven came outfitted with serious photographic hardware. Some had dedicated Nikonos systems with powerful strobes, another a Canon SLR inside an intricate housing, and one bringing digital video gear housed inside, of all things, an air tank custom cut to purpose. Our dive master had nearly 4000 dives under her belt. During sit-down meals, briefings and late night rap sessions, the divers spoke of European, American, Central and South American and African diving. Isomer spoke of diving unusual wrecks, like a vertical-standing ship that, even after being rammed to the bottom of the Gulf of Thailand, has remained standing on

end, stern first. *Atlantis X* is a wooden boat, structurally stiff and heavy enough to remain stable in swells and chop. This boat has eight cabins, and can travel with up to 16 divers and seven crew members. Its heads are as complete as any restroom, and there are decks enough to hold any number of napping people between dives. The air-conditioned main decks keep the air dry and cool, and allow for sleeping under warm blankets. Outfitted with GPS, the captain and craft found sites with just coordinates, in this case, a recently sunken fishing boat miles from the nearest island. On the rear decks are two air compressors, keeping all air tanks filled with at least 200 bar of pressure. A low dive platform made entering and leaving the water easy. Its 12000-liter fresh water tank kept the showers flowing. Even the rigged outdoor shower nozzles ran with warm water, perfect for rinsing after a dive or soaking a wetsuit before putting it on. Though the rear cockpit was full of divers and equipment, it was well organized and with the help of the crew during preparations, efficient. Throughout the day, they gave us menus with both Western and Thai dishes, and asked, What do you want to eat when we get back? The boat features a Thai cook fluent in both the feeding needs of energy-burning divers, and discriminating palates of jet setters. The food prepared to perfection. Night departure allowed for a briefing about the boat, introductions all around, and then a gentle rock to sleep for the crossing between Patong and the islands. When I awoke in the morning,

I could see steep jungle slopes of the eighth island just outside my cabin. Coffee or tea, toast and preserves were self-serve, followed by the morning briefing and dive. Breakfast was served after the first dive in a sit down buffet, and western style with bacon, eggs, toast, coffee, juice and cereal all prepared well. Shallow reef diving at Koh Bangu's Snapper Alley was breathtaking, and a cool departure from the hot waters of Krabi and Koh Phi Phi. *Atlantis X*, piloted by a Thai with an ability to maneuver the 90 foot craft like a much smaller vessel, dropped three groups of divers at one end of the long stretch for a drift dive. The shallowest portion of the dive ran to the surface at the beach, while the deepest at 26 meters was marked by the end of the coral and the beginning of the endless sand into deeper waters. The gentle flow ran perfectly parallel to the shore, wafting us over elaborate, theatrical coral heads and rock formations, past large fans and other finely detailed sea life at a slow pace. We drifted past 300 yards of coral and rock broken by the occasional river of white sand that reminded me of ski slopes in the early morning before anyone skies them. Though the Similan Islands closely resemble each other where land is concerned, below the sea's surface they're startlingly different. Even the underwater environment on one side of an island may be different from the far side as evidenced by our next dive, also at Koh Bangu, at its Christmas Point location. Here were boulders ranging from car size to house size and currents that stirred around these rock

formations in an amusing, swirling fashion. The current kept the rocks clear of larger coral growth, giving these mammoth granite stones a majestic presence. Many looked to like statues that were never carved reclining Buddha, leaning towers and gothic arches. Where Snapper Alley was swarmed with smaller fish, Christmas Point had the larger, more curious fish to keep us company, including brightly painted clown trigger fish, moray eels and bat fish to name only a few of the hundreds of fish around. The *Atlantis* met us at the surface. There are morays hidden deep in rocks and coral, black moray, green moray, leopard shark, shrimp and frog fish. The triggerfish were more docile than the aggressive nesting titans that routinely bruised up encroaching divers at Koh Tao. I logged five dives, including a night dive that reminded me of an indoor ride at Disneyland. *Atlantis'* powerful lights beamed down from overhead toward the end of our dive, turning the water clear. The sand reflected the light in all directions and divers appeared to float suspended in an eerie green space. A white tip reef shark made an appearance, and a large lobster and thousands of shrimp with their reflecting eyes. Ed, a giant moray eel has taken up permanent home in a horned coral head. The water, the islands, the people, everything came together to make for a Thailand grand finale. **(Ph: 66-76-344-850; e-mail info@atlantis-asia.com; website www.atlantis-asia.com)** P.S. The *Atlantis X* sank in August, 2002.

Catch Up, April 2002, Kinson Tong (kinsontong@hotmail.com) Fanling, NT. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Three hour ride from dive shop to port. Got assigned a room next to the kitchen therefore got roaches on the bed on several nights. Engine was below our cabin, fortunately, we got some earplugs from Boots. Air-con went off in the middle of one night, came back up later. Food was okay. Dive was beyond expectation. 2-3 mantas at the last diving day. One manta had a rope across its face, very sad. A whale shark about 18 feet. Got chased away by another group of divers. One of them even tried to touch the beauty with his bare hands, wanted to kill him right away. Dive guides were okay. Not particularly attentive to divers — took divers out there and bring them back. That's all. Saw around a school of dolphins when boat was returning to port. (Ph: 66-76-344-337 ; e-mail info@highclass-adventure.com; website www.highclass-adventure.com)

Faah Yai, Siam Dive and Sail, November 2001, Kirk Montgomery (Kirkandgail@shaw.ca) Coombs, B.C. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm currents. Accommodates only ten divers on her 85 foot length; service and accommodations fantastic with large staterooms and private head. The crew of six and two dive masters were professional and all needs were met. Food was plentiful and tasty and mostly Thai that was not too spicy as to ruin a dive. Briefings were thorough, which was invaluable on some

high current dives. We booked the trip through Siam Dive and Sail in which John was of great help for all aspects of our vacation! All the dives took place in the Mergui Archipelago. Dynamite fishing evidence and stay nets on the reef made many dives shocking. Many publications are touting this as a pristine, unspoiled and that it is a destination for serious divers, but after seeing the disregard for their reefs, I was compelled to write to the tourism ministry in Myanmar. They charge \$20 per day to dive in their waters to see the destruction of this ecosystem. Photography setup on boat was quite good (table and fresh water) except the television for playback of video and digital stills was not very good. Boats should have plug-ins and jacks readily accessible. (Ph: +66-76-385-143; e-mail kamala@phuket.ksc.co.th; http://scuba-quest.de/engl)

Faah Yai, Scuba Quest, March 2002, Jeffrey Davis, Oakland, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Fly to Phuket, Thailand, from BKK or HK, minivan 5 hrs north to the *Faah Yai*, for direct access to Burmese waters, 7-day trip \$1600+\$140 Burma fee, ten divers, seven crew. Weather partly cloudy to near-overcast often bright, air temp 90s, water 86! Some thermoclines, full moon, surface calm, underwater at times significant surge and currents, the ocean was plankton soup, cutting the viz to 15-75'; (plankton=>mantas). Adequately roomy, clean AC bunk cabins w/ shower, linen-change midweek, salon w/audio-video, sundeck, buffet Thai

meals except western breakfast, rice, noodles w/lots of fresh fruits/vegs, salads, soups, fish, crab, prawns, chicken, stir-fried, grilled. Charged for canned soft drinks and beer. Some camera space, rinse barrel, shower on dive platform. Well-run boat and diving operation. Highly attentive Thai crew, generous tank-fills-in-place, detailed dive-site maps and briefings with divemaster Joe, good dive planning with the tides, 1-2 divemasters and often the Zodiac in the water, dive w/buddy and computer profile three day and one night dive daily, log in your dives on the clipboard, a relaxed atmosphere. Burmese agent on board for the week. Fun crew and German, British, US divers. The sites are isolated rocks and tiny islands that protrude from the sea, a variety of coral slopes, walls, crevasses and swim-throughs, dives 40-120 feet. All week only one other boat w/divers. The reefs were undisturbed, classes and species of marine life diverse. Great beauty: varied nudibranchs, jellies, sea snake, hard and soft corals and anemones, crustaceans, mating cuttlefish, octopus, multiple moray species in a single crack, turtle, devil, spotted, and giant manta rays, sea horses, nurse, zebra, silver-tip, white-tip, and gray reef sharks, schools of fish in profusion.

MV Faah Yai, April 2002, Jay Treat (jtreat@jaytreat.com) Tulsa, OK.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 5 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 83 F, currents. I flew into Phuket and took a van to the departing point of Ranong, Thailand. This is included in the charter price

but I would fly into Ranong next time. The departing dock and the entry point into Burma are depressingly run down but when you awake the morning after departure, you'll be in an untouched paradise among endless uninhabited islands. The *MV Faah Yai* is a functional boat with good Thai food and a/c in the rooms that, at times, only barely works (mine was apparently the only room with this problem). With only ten passengers, it's not crowded and the dive operation is efficient. My first trip to Indo-Pacific waters and it impressed me enough to think about a second trip. Visit my website for a full writeup and photos: http://www.jaytreat.com/Diving/Thailand_02/Report.htm. Wonderful small fish and critter life. There were large schools but often hindered by poor visibility. Small camera table. I did most of my setup in the galley. (Ph: +66-76-385-143; e-mail kamala@phuket.ksc.co.th; <http://scuba-quest.de/engl>)

Ocean Rover, March 2001,

H. Wayne Ferguson

(wferguson@fergusonmetals.com)

Lawrenceburg, IN. Vis: 50-70 ft.

Water: 73-76 F. Dives logged: 343.

Dive restrictions enforced: 100 ft. The overall experience was great. We had a variety of fish along with brilliant soft corals and spectacular anemones and nudis. Mark Strickland was in charge of the dive operations and he made sure you saw everything there was to see. He also coached my friend in the correct manner of underwater photography. The staff was terrific in all aspects. The food was great and

varied every day. The ship lacked stabilizers that made for some rocking and rolling. They told us this would be taken care of in the off season.

(Ph: +66-7628 1387 (Thailand); e-mail info@fantasea.net; website www.fantasea.net)

Ocean Rover, FantaSea,
February 2002, James Lyle
(jlyle@beachnet.com) Hermosa
Beach, CA. Experience: Over 1000
dives. Vis: 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82
F, calm currents. The best live-
aboard yet. Fantastic crew, great

boat and fantastic diving. Mark
Strickland is the cruise director/
photo pro. He wrote the book on
diving in Thailand. Lots of space for
cameras.

Ocean Rover, FantaSea, April 2002,
Lowell & Margo Greenberg
(lomagreen@cox.net) Palos Verdes
Estates, CA. Vis: 30-80 ft. Water:
82-84 F. Dives logged: >200. No
liquor on board. Bring your own.
Staff magnificent. We never touched
our tanks and they even helped us
get dressed in wet suits.

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