

typical trip aboard the *Serenade* might be like. Presumably we missed the marquee dives of the trip by not getting farther north or out to the underwater volcanoes. The *Serenade* crew was outstanding, as evidenced by their willingness to let us call the shots as far as the itinerary and choice of dive sites were concerned. However, when it comes to the frills and the creature comforts, it doesn't compare with live-aboards of the standards of, say, the Aggressor fleet. If I were to decide to dive this area again, I would book on the *Ocean Rover*.

(www.manado-liveaboards.com,
<http://murexdive.com>)

MALDIVES

Manthiri, December 2002, Glenn Davis, Pittsburg, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy, currents. Diving was very nice. Usual dive was starting outside of a reef and flowing inside through a channel in the reef along with a mild to strong current. Nice, small soft corals; hard corals were mostly broken up and dead — some starting to grow back. Saw sharks, eagle and stingrays, turtles, Napoleon wrasse, lots of lion fish, honeycomb and moray eels, many smaller colorful tropical fish and some nudibranchs. Nice underwater topography and good vis outside of the reef and going through channel. Not for the novice, relatively strong currents at times, surface was sometimes pretty rough, as were exits from water. I was used to this from Monterey and other dive experiences — but my compan-

ion got a bit bruised on the ladder a few times. The boat crew handled everything well. The dive master and captain were excellent. Really liked the crew. One to four dives a day, including a night dive, though not every day. First day got one dive; last day of diving got in three dives; in between, three to four a day. Eight-day cruise including last day which was in port where we left after breakfast. While I liked the diving and the crew, the boat left much to be desired. Perhaps for Maldives live-aboards it is great but not compared to what I have read about Peter Hughes and related classes of boats. Upon boarding the boat found it had been fumigated and the odor was quite unpleasant. Read another post to *Undercurrent* that this boat has a cockroach problem, and they do this between trips. They need to do it and do it again, as we had many cockroaches, mostly recent hatchlings and a few large ones. They didn't seem to open up all the cabinets to get the fumigant into all spaces and so it wasn't thorough. Also, they didn't air out the boat before the guests arrived, and so it was quite sickening. Cabins were pretty noisy due to generator that always ran to power lights and A/C. A/C was turned up so high that we froze much of the time inside the boat. As we learned where the switches were we turned most off but never found the one for the hall outside the cabins — the engineer didn't know where that switch was either, so it was an arctic dash to get into our cabins wet after diving. Food was OK. Occasionally a very good dish. Breakfasts were white bread toasted,

cold fried eggs, oatmeal, fruit. Snack before first dive and in afternoon — bland cookies, bananas, and tea.

Diving was from a chase boat that did not have a camera table or dedicated camera fresh water container (plastic trash can shared with rinsing wet suits and sundry items — only had 10 inches water, leaked till I suggested matching with duct tape). There is an OK dedicated tank on the main ship, not very large. Lucky there were only two cameras on this trip — mine and the dive guide. Tank could hold two cameras with full setup of strobes and arms plus small snap shot cameras. Onboard is a 10-foot camera shelf/counter with good lighting and 110 volt plugs to charge strobes and lights. Would be quite crowded with more than two cameras on it. My first live-aboard, I hear that other boats have better arrangements for UWP gear. The boat has E-6 processing, two rolls min. at a time, and a light table. (www.manthiri.com)

Manthiri, March 2003, Gayle & Kris Anderson (animalfrank@msn.com), **Klamath Falls, OR.** Dives logged: 500+. Dive restrictions enforced: 120 feet. Vis: 70 to 100+ feet. Water: 83 to 86 F. The Maldivians were extremely friendly towards us. This was our first live-aboard trip, and it was fantastic. Moosa, Manik, Ali, and the crew were super! The food was great. The diving was the best variety we have experienced on any single trip. Tons of reef and schooling fish. Many eagle rays and turtles, and they were so friendly and curious (not running for their lives!). Reef sharks, we were even

lucky enough to see a whale shark. The high point however, was the manta show. Not only did we see them on several dives, but they put on a 45-minute underwater ballet (5 of them). Yes, the hard corals have been devastated by El Nino, but there is still plenty of great diving. Now I know why they say that the Maldives are the best!

Manthiri, July 2003, John Ares, Staten Island, NY. A friend and I went to the Beneath the Sea show in Secaucus, N.J., and met Nancy Chase, representing the live-aboard *Manthiri*. This year we searched for places that still “liked Americans.” And the list was quickly getting short in areas that are suitable for world class diving. Only 1 percent of the tourists that go to the Maldives are Americans. Find your way to India. Then go 300 miles to the southwest. This is an independent island nation of 1,200 islands and 90 or so resorts. The *Manthiri* was very good. Crew of 12 and four passengers. 55-foot seaworthy dive boat that accompanies the 85-foot yacht. Divemaster Manik was warm and hospitable. Experience and instinct make a difference. We made 24 dives and shot 40 rolls of film. No E-6 processing was available despite being advertised, assured, and verified ahead of time. Apparently crew had family emergency with no backup trained. Bring digital and laptop with you to be assured of your own facilities, 120 voltage is there. The reason you go is for mantas, whale sharks, huge schools of fish, variety of marine life, many Indo-Pacific endemic species,

and a new culture. We got all of it, with the exception of a whale shark chase instead of a sighting. This mister big continues to elude us despite a half an hour hunt in the dinghy. Food was terrific; typical of live-aboards, they feed you every two hours. We got more diving than expected, including night dives. Cabin was spacious and put all other live-aboards to shame. Private bathrooms. 85-foot yacht *Manthiri* accompanied by a 55-foot dive boat and dinghy. You will spend time on all. Two village visits plus a tour of the capital, Male, were included in the \$1,400+ discounted per person fee. Food included fresh-caught tuna, unique tuna jerky snacks, curries, chicken, pasta, and otherwise basically catered to American tastes. Wine included with dinner, beer extra. We became fast friends with the other divers. Reefs were damaged from the legendary 1998 El Nino. The hard corals are coming back, and the soft corals are thriving. The fish life is still here and is vibrant and thrilling. Schools of tuna feeding in the morning instead of sharks. There are still a few gray reef sharks that haven't been harvested for sharkfin soup and some shy whitetip sharks. You will find cowries, flatworms, and other usual, colorful Indo-Pacific critters. In the way of big stuff, lots of hawksbill turtles, eels, fusiliers, schools of yellow snappers, big rays are abundant. Present are garden eels, remoras, lionfish, triggers, napoleon wrasse, schools of tuna, and Pacific barracuda. The reefs have lots of blue soft coral, tons of anemones, clownfish, damselfish, anthias, chromis, and starfish.

Expect combat descents with the swift drift diving. You should have at least 100 "real" dives under your weight belt to do this kind of diving. Be able to descend as soon as you enter. No fiddling for snorkels is allowed. Boat has 92 cu-ft. tanks for air and nitrox. I enjoyed the 92 cu-ft. air supplied. Sausages and DiveAlerts are required. Village visits are supplied. This is a Muslim country, and you must respect their views. Alcohol is OK on the *Manthiri* and resorts. The village visits will introduce you to the few areas that Westerners are allowed. They have learned our ways and are aggressive and will goad you to enter their T-shirt shops to buy overpriced goods that you must bargain for. Exactly like Americans, most are polite but a few ruin it and are over the top in aggressiveness. Photo opportunities of the locals exist for a price. Five kids and a chicken go for a dollar. With the dollar going to the mother. This was so worth it — these are the genuine, spontaneous moments. Don't ask the chicken, however. Nowhere do you feel threatened. Short eats are available in the local tea house (for men) but foreign women are allowed. Divemaster Ali took us in and paid for the terrific experience of savory and sweet snacks. Looking upwards during the village visit, you may see fruit bats with two foot wingspans instead of starlings or pigeons. The Maldives are especially well known among Europeans.

***Sea Spirit*, February 2003, Jerry Loveless (JerryL3515@aol.com), Las Vegas, NV. Experience: Over**

Indian Ocean and Red Sea

1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet.

Water: 82 to 84 F, surge, currents.

Singapore Air flight from Las Vegas to Male via Hong Kong and

Singapore, overnighted in Male in the Hulhule Hotel — pleasant and

convenient. The next morning we boarded *Sea Spirit*, a lovely boat

with an eager all-Maldivian crew — who, unfortunately, speak little

English. The dive guides, Erica and Jason, were from Australia. The dive

trip was slow getting started — we had to go back to the airport and

after a long delay finally boarded the dhoni for the trip to the *Sea Spirit*.

Only one dive the first day. The second day was similar — long transit

and little diving. Not a good start. It got better after that, but with a maxi-

mum of three dives a day and an occasional (rare) night dive.

However, we really enjoyed the boat.

Spacious cabins, comfortable beds,

OK storage. The bathrooms worked,

and the lounge was comfortable. A/C worked just okay; the cabins got hot

at night so several people slept top-

side. The food was a nice surprise;

the chef did a wonderful job giving

us a varied menu. All diving is done

from dhonis — which look like a

rustic version of a Hong Kong water

taxi. Covered, with good shade, they

have benches for (sometimes) long

transits to the dive sites. All dive

gear is kept on the dhoni and tanks

are filled there. We felt that the

dhoni was slow and clumsy and dan-

gerous to board in rough seas. For

diving we much prefer the faster and

more maneuverable inflatables that

most other live-aboards use. Fish life

throughout the Maldives was super abundant — lots and lots of fish of

all sizes. Schools of mantas, dozens

of eagle rays, sharks (gray reefs and

white tips), Napoleon wrasses, on

down through the chain to the mil-

lions of little guys. By far the most

fish life we've seen in a long time.

Unfortunately, the coral is still in

bad shape from El Nino, but starting

to redevelop. Small hard coral devel-

oping and some larger soft corals.

On a couple of dives the coral was

really quite pretty. Generally, visibil-

ity was not great — 60 feet but that's

where you find the mantas, right?

And we did! It's hard to explain the

excitement of seeing a "herd" of 30

to 50 mantas hovering around like

B-2 bombers. Very cool! Again and

again we encountered these magnifi-

cent creatures, along with eagle rays,

lots and lots of sharks, turtles,

Napoleon wrasses. The wet blanket

on the trip were the "dive guides" or

"cruise directors" or "videographers"

(they devoted the vast amount of

their time to making an underwater

video which they tried to sell to us at

the end of the trip). They really

added little to the dive experience

except to cast an atmosphere of

gloom. Rarely smiling or talking,

and frequently grouchy. Significant

communication between these 'man-

agers' and the divers was almost

nonexistent. There was no introduc-

tion to the crew, no safety briefing,

no discussion of our schedule —

where we were going or what we

might expect. Well, into the trip we

were told that there was a pamphlet

in every cabin that explained it all.

Not true. We should be briefed at the beginning of the trip with opportunity to ask questions. We were told that we'd be able to go ashore and visit one of the many resorts, but that never happened. We were told it wasn't convenient. I'm not sure what the dive guides' problems were — burnout maybe — they told us they'd been on the boat a long time. Or maybe we're terribly spoiled having just come from *Ocean Rover* and her fabulous crew. It was disappointing to run into a couple of sour personalities. It's a shame because the owners have done a great job creating this beautiful boat. *Sea Spirit* is just too nice an operation to let a couple of disgruntled managers ruin it. We had great fun, and some memorable experiences with mantas which were worth the whole trip — but it could have been so much more enjoyable with a good divemasters. Here, there was no discussion. I felt uncomfortable asking for anything or making any recommendations because they showed so little grace and understanding. Never asking, "How are things?" or "What do you need?" or "Do you have any suggestions or questions?" They just weren't open to anything like that. So we did our diving and had our fun. Liked the boat very much and the diving was great. Arrangements by: Reef and Rainforest, 800-794-9767, www.reefrainforest.com. E-mail: Jenny@reefrainforest.com. UW photography comments: *Sea Spirit* and the accompanying dhoni have little space dedicated to cameras. One small charging station in the salon. For camera

maintenance we used dining tables or did it in our cabin.

(www.scubascuba.com)

RED SEA

Aqua Sport, Taba Hilton, May 2003, David Shem-Tov, London, NA.

Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 10 to 15 meters. Water: 23 to 24 C, calm, no currents. Escorted by dive guide Evgeny across from *Aqua Sport's* Eilat, Israel, location to their Hilton Taba, Egypt, affiliate, where we boarded a comfortable boat. Dive guide knowledgeable and offered detailed briefings. Once in the water, however, he exhibited excessive authoritarianism that irritated some divers. Clients were expected to set up their own equipment and change tanks. Assistance was offered in climbing to boat. Good lunch and complimentary lunch offered by friendly boat crew. A fair amount of small fish, but none over 1 foot. Abundance of healthy hard coral, but little soft coral. Very few divers reach north Egypt. Many Israelis are reluctant to cross border into Egypt right now. Most foreign divers go further south. Rental equipment available was a little tatty. Management in Eilat was distrustful of clients and demanded to hold on to C-cards, as well as a signed blank credit card voucher until invoice settled. I was staying with friends, but good reports from divers staying at the Taba Hilton, which offers substantially better deals than the Eilat hotels across the border, and where the Taba *Aqua Sport* office is located. (www.aqua-sport.com)