

We traveled on Singapore Air using frequent flyer mileage and with travel time and layovers it took almost three days of travel time in each direction. More direct connections are available through Germany and Britain, but it's still a long trip. Strong surge and currents made photography a real challenge on some days. Also, the plankton counts in the water caused some problems with backscatter if strobe was not perfectly aimed. The boats did not have camera tables or rinse tanks, but the crew was helpful in finding safe places to stow camera equipment on board. They were also helpful in assisting with equipment during entries and exits. There are large separate rinse tanks for camera equipment at the docks. The resort offered E-6 processing, and there were excellent photography courses for both beginners as well as experienced photographers. (www.euro-divers.com)

RED SEA

Hurghada dive operators are failing to provide loving care to nearby reefs, so divers head further south. European divers still heavily visit the area, but Americans are reluctant. Water temperatures can drop into the cool 60s during February and rise into the 80s by August. ... Many divers combine a Red Sea trip with a visit to Israel and biblically historical sites.

Egypt

Divers International, Sofitel, August 2002, David Bryan (dabmushi@aol.com), Great Missenden, Bucks,

UK. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, calm. Accommodations at the Sofitel were good. I live in the U.K., so travel was fairly easy. Decided to use dive operation on site as web site looked good and had own jetty at hotel. In reality had to be bused to town to get the boat. Logistics were poor and often it was an hour or two from meeting at the hotel's dive center to the boat actually sailing. Two dive trips could mean meeting at 8:45 a.m. and not being back at the hotel until about 6 p.m. — an appalling waste of time. Lunch and drinks on boat weren't too bad but cost extra. All gear has to be transferred into plastic crates, and they look after it and take to the boat every day. They never lost anything, but it never looked that reliable a system. Sometimes had to wait up to 45 minutes after getting back to hotel before gear arrived, so that I could rinse it. On one three-dive trip, we decided to sit out the second dive. After lunch we just sailed back to port. When I asked what was happening, they said not enough people wanted to do the third dive. We had been at the dive center at 7:45 and got back at about 4:30, so all that for just one dive. Coral looked in poor condition in many places. Saw no large pelagics. Only large fish was a good-size Napoleon wrasse. Smaller fish more plentiful, but overall I was disappointed. On one occasion I counted 14 boats moored at the same site for lunch — each capable of carrying 25 divers. It's just too much. Ports are a zoo as well with too many boats for the jetty space. On the last day I wanted to just do a shore dive. I had snorkeled over the house reef, and it looked quite

good. Maximum depth about 25 to 30 feet, but they wouldn't let me dive it without a divemaster at a \$30 charge because I didn't have advanced certification. A few harsh words were exchanged but they wouldn't budge. Overall a nice place with friendly people, but they need to get their act together with the diving or they are going to kill their main attraction. If you are going I would suggest trying Red Sea Diving College or Camel Club or Cean College — all were recommended to me by others as better run. (www.diversintl.com)

THAILAND

Thailand is a bargain. ... Whale shark season is usually from March through May, with Richelieu Rock providing an excellent chance for encounters.

January 2003, Bill Mashek, Forestville, CA. In my 15 days I explored three different regions of southern Thailand. Phuket: Everything you have heard about Thai taxi drivers is true. This includes passing on curves, hills, tailgating inches behind the car in front. There is no road rage, but plenty of traffic deaths. Sea Breeze Inn: you can get anything you want in this little neighborhood, clothes, jewelry, Thai massage (highly recommended), hair cut, many restaurants, mini markets, pharmacy and even a dental office. There are many dive shops and dive boats. Sheldon Hey, an Australian expat, owns Dive the World Thailand (www.divetheworldthailand.com). He answered all my e-mail questions and

worked with me on an itinerary. He picked out the dive boats I used in Phuket and Phi Phi Island. He also arranged all my transfers (seven) in air conditioned taxis. A German company named Sea Bees had a brand new dive boat: Excalibur. The trip consisted of four dives including one night dive. We dove the Phi Phi Islands and surrounding areas: Shark Point: typical South Pacific corals and fish. Interesting but not spectacular. Visibility 50 ft. Maximum depth 80 ft for 51 minutes, 2 cuttle fish, a seahorse and a sleeping leopard shark. Phi Phi Island: Kho Bida Nok. More cuttle fish, huge tube corals and lots of colors, mating leopard sharks and lionfish. Visibility in the 75 foot range. Night Dive: Kho Dok Mai, a rock sticking out of the water half way between Phuket and Kho Phi Phi. Interesting wall dive with unique colors and different fish. Huge cavern with small cave (about 15 ft straight in) fairly strong currents. We dove in small groups, 2-4 divers in each group. Jurgen from Belgium was my dive guide — excellent and the only one who spoke fluent English. We went North to Khoa Lak. Poseidon Bungalows consisted of 14 small cabins situated along the rocky shores. Prices \$10 to \$20. Food \$1.50-\$3 per meal. A 3-day snorkeling trip to the Similan Islands cost approximately \$150US. Khoa Lak is the closest access to the Similan Islands. A trip to the Similans, which includes Richelieu Rock (Surin Islands) and Burma Banks (Myanmar) would take a minimum of 5 days four nights. I recommend Siam Dive n Sail, Dive the world Thailand, KonTiki or Sea Dragon to set you up on a live-