

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-

aboard to meet your needs. Kon Tiki and Sea Dragon offer one day trips to the Similans and Richelieu Rock. We did an overnight with Kontiki and slept at the national park campground on the Similan Islands. Our divemaster was a very competent young Swedish woman Jessie, who spoke excellent English. Similan Islands: Tranquil white sand beaches and turquoise water with gin clear visibility, over 200 feet. Meadows of soft corals and sea fans combined with a prolific fish population. Pelagics are seasonal. Mantas and whale sharks are not common. I saw bigger fish farther south at the Phi Phi Island sites. East of Eden: Preeminent coral formations, I could only compare to Cozumel. Lots of small fish, rabbitfish, clownfish, one lionfish, garden eels, boxfish and others. Visibility 150-200 ft. Elephant Rock, Donald Duck Cove. Huge boulders, sea fans and hard corals. Many small and colorful reef fish. Visibility 70+ ft. Snorkeling and free diving in Donald Duck Bay. Turtle Rock; this was a fast drift dive for a short time until we went around the island. Not as many fish but saw several lobsters and a ribbon eel. Breakfast Bend. A banded sea snake (poisonous but not aggressive) wrapped himself around my leg and passed through my BC vest. Turquoise water, 200 ft visibility and copious fish population. Ko Sac National Park: Interesting limestone formations. After a 3-mile hike to a waterfall we stopped outside the park and went on an elephant trek. We rented kayaks and paddled 10 miles on a class 1-2 river (creek) that followed the highway. Saw a 10-ft. king cobra, gibbon, two wild elephants and a fist size

spider, scenery was superb. Traveled by taxi to the Krabi village of Anong Beach. Swiss tourists mostly. Quaint Swiss bungalows across from the beach called Wannas Place. At \$30 per night this was a fair bargain. Dove with a Swiss operation, Anong Divers. They put us on a Kon Tiki boat and we dived the Phi Phi Islands. Krabi area is distant from dive sites which is reflected in the price. Phi Phi Island: I took a "speed boat" to Hin Daeng; one of Thailand's best wall dives. Hin Daeng is considered the place to see mantas and whale sharks — of which I saw neither. Saw bigger fish here including, large groupers, schools of big barracuda, several morays, lionfish mating, and all the normal tropicals. Visibility and depth of dive exceeded 100 feet with strong currents. 100 meters from Hin Daeng was Hin Muang an under water reef covered with a variety of corals, and prolific sea life, deep dive with moderate to strong currents. The dive operator was Phi Phi Scuba, an Australian operation on Phi Phi Island. Get air price info by calling the airlines directly — not via Internet. Then go through an Asian travel agency, usually in a larger city. They buy most of the wholesale tickets and this is reflected in their prices. I saved over \$100 on my ticket. The best time to travel to Thailand (weather) is December to March. Use a local (Thailand based) operation. Almost all dive operations are European or Australian managed. Boat captains are Thai. Thai folk like receipts — keep all receipts or you may pay twice. If nothing else you have to get a Thai massage.
(www.divetheworldthailand.com,
<http://sea-bees.com>,

www.siamdivers.com,
<http://seacanoen.net/index.htm>,
www.kontiki-khaolak.com,
www.similantour.nu,
www.phuket.com)

Koh Phi Phi

Phi Phi Scuba Dive Center, Phi Phi Princess Resort, November 2002, Phil & Patricia Tobin (Philtobin6625@yahoo.com), Portland, OR.

Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm. Phi Phi Island around the resort was beautiful. Step out the resort, and it was a mess.

Garbage everywhere, smell, sewage, etc. Too much building, not enough services to handle the masses of people. Average age on island was 24. Drugs blatant everywhere. Phi Phi Scuba Center (bright yellow building on main drag): Outstanding operation, Europeans own it. Well organized, efficient, and friendly and helpful staff. Safety first, along with enjoyment second. We did seven dives in four days. Most sites are a 25- to 45-minute boat ride. King Cruiser, Shark Point, Bidah, to mention a few. Water was warm 86, but visibility was disappointing. Millions of fish, like nothing we had ever seen in our limited diving experience. Sharks right in your face. Hard and soft corals so big and colorful it is hard to describe. Purples, blues, reds, and oranges so bright and vibrant. Tons of cuttle fish within arms' reach, lion fish, cudas six feet long, eels, squid, and the list just goes on and on — fantastic! Boats were crowded; getting into your equipment when it was dive time was a challenge. Food between the

dives was adequate, rice and chicken or sandwiches with all the bottled water you need, and fresh fruit between dives. Ate lunch in the bay of the famous “The Beach” from movie fame. Very scenic. We hired a guide since we were fairly new divers. From Ireland, and terrific. We would cover the walls inch by inch looking for small critters. Overall experience was fantastic. Highly recommend this dive operation. (www.phippi-scuba.com, www.phuket.com/ppprincess)

Koh Tao

Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort, March 2002, Cathy & Bob Bodnar, Chicago, IL. Experience: Cathy 130 dives/Bob 900 dives. Vis: 20-30 feet. Water 83-85 F. Slight current. Air 90-95 F. Sunny. Planned a land based vacation to Thailand and decided to try to dive while we were out there. Resources abound on the Internet — keep in mind the authoritative source of the information — thought we'd try Koh Tao's Coral Grand Resort because it touted diving (had a dive operation on site) and was at the far end of Sairee Beach (a bit quieter away from “town”). Our Thailand adventure began in Bangkok. Took Bangkok Air to Koh Samui, from Koh Samui took the Lomprayah High Speed Catamaran (about \$10 per person) to Koh Tao via Koh Pha-Ngan (1.5 hours). Carrying your own luggage to the catamaran on a rickety pier was part of the adventure. The catamaran could hold around 150 people. There was a cash bar and for entertainment, a movie (in English with Thai subtitles). Disembarking in Koh Tao (Turtle Island

because of it's shape) across another rickety pier we were engulfed by locals hawking dive shops and dive resorts. Pressing through the crowd of at least 20 different hawkers, locals meeting the boat and people preparing to board we found our way to a main street. We found a taxi — a small pick up truck (luggage and passengers ride in the back) that took us down unpaved roads to the Coral Grand Resort. The Coral Grand was a pleasant surprise; it looked just like the pictures on their Internet site. Guests stay in individual cottages with private bathroom facilities. We learned the resort had just opened, and one look around we could see the cottages were in various states of construction. By now the resort is probably complete with 50 cottages of various sizes. We stayed in the “Superior Sailor Cottage” — the resort projected 27 cottages in this category, ranging in size from 33-45 square meters. We had a queen-size bed but they do offer twin-size beds as well — overhead fan and a/c for cooling. Other amenities include coffee maker, mini bar, refrigerator, and hair dryer. Nice covered balcony with an overhead fan, large enough to accommodate a picnic table. Railings to hold beach towels, bathing, and wet suits. The resort had a restaurant and bar but a short walk down the beach opened up a variety of dining choices. An example of an average meal for 2 — chicken with vegetables and rice, clear noodles with vegetables, banana shake and one Singha beer, less than \$5 total. Spent 4 nights on Koh Tao, doing 7 dives. Dive operation is run by Scandinavian folks, the equipment was pristine. We brought our 2 and 3-mm

suits, masks, fins and snorkels and rented the rest. Rentals included weights (kgs here not lbs, gauges (bars not psi), regulators, octopus and computers. Big time plankton making visibility 20-25 feet on average, on a good dive 30 feet, on a bad dive 10 feet. Lots of colorful fish — angels, parrots, sergeant majors, butterfly fish, clown fish in huge anemones, yellow tails, tons of sea cucumbers, sea urchins, star fish (5 and 6 legged), Christmas tree worms, one 50 lb. grouper, tridacnas and did see crown of thorns. Dove with 1 or 2 other divers, all European. One of the divers was a divemaster from Koh Samui diving with his dad from the UK. Diving Koh Tao was not as spectacular as some South Pacific destinations but it was a great add on to our land-based trip. It allowed us to see a different, slower-paced side of Thailand that was beautiful. The resort and the dive operation had friendly, accommodating staff. For the two of us 4-nights lodging, dives, and equipment cost us \$550. (www.kohtaoluxury.com)

Phuket

Paradise Diving, Pearl Village Hotel, April 2003, Estelle Nadeau, St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, currents. My comment is about the diving shop Paradise Diving in Nai Yang beach, Phuket. I did not make that dive because I almost drowned. There were two divemasters. The first one got in the water, I went second. We were on the rope waiting, so I put on my snorkel and looked underwater and the boat

takes off!!! No warning. It was going fast enough that the people on the boat could not see us, all they could see was water coming over our heads. If I let go of the rope, the divemaster behind me hits my tank, and my snorkel isn't doing the job anymore because the water is coming over it and in it. By some miracle, I get hold of my regulator underwater (it was going with the flow of the water) and put it in my mouth, after I don't know how much water I swallowed. The divemaster that was in the water with me didn't understand why I didn't like the ride! The other one didn't say stop to the captain! When I complained to the boss when we came back, he was the only one who realized he almost had a disaster on his hands. His assistant even told me they did this often, move the boat with people in the water on a rope!
(www.dive-paradise.com,
www.phuket.com/pearlvillage)

Sea Bees Diving, Palm Garden Resort, May 2003, Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. Palm Garden Resort in Chalong, on Phuket Island, is a small resort in the jungle about 300 yards outside Chalong. It has 12 bungalows with 24 rooms wrapped around a swimming pool. The rooms are quite nice and have a separate drying room for your dive gear. The small Thai staff is very friendly and keeps the place in great shape. The resort caters to Europeans; being the only American there I did not feel out of place. The cook made custom meals for you, if you did not see anything on the menu you liked. You could get Thai food as mild or as hot as you wanted. Palm

Garden is within walking distance of several dive shops and places to eat. There is no nightlife in Chalong and very little shopping. Sea Bees dive shop is affiliated with Palm Garden. Palm Garden is very hard to find, e-mail them and have them pick you up. www.palm-garden-resort.com, contact Hilia. Sea Bees Diving is 300 yards from Palm Garden Resort. I was set up to do five days of diving before going on a live-aboard (by www.worldofdiving.com). Sea Bees picks up divers from as far away as Patong (about 25-minute drive) at no charge, so you can stay on the other side of the island with the beaches: We all meet at the dive shop at 9 a.m. and are bused to the pier. Sea Bees' dive boat is 72 feet long and 15 feet wide. Called the *Excalibur II*. It takes as many as 30 divers. Sea Bees has one divemaster for every four divers. All dive sites are at least one hour out to sea. So breakfast is served, your divemaster will find you and go over the dive info and times, and safety stop is a must. All dives are 50 minutes or 50 bar(750 psi) — with a three-minute safety stop at 18 feet. You could go off on your own if you had a computer, safety sausage, and watched your time, 50 minutes max. After the first dive, lunch is served and you get about a one-hour surface interval. Dive briefing and next 50 minute dive. Fruit trays are served for the ride back to the dock; this is an all-day trip, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. The shop, the divemasters, the Thai crew, and the boat were all excellent. The corals, both hard and soft, were in great shape. Tons of tropical fish and small critters. Only a few large fish. Some current on a few dive sites,

most of the surge was above 25 feet. The Monsoon rains had not yet started. (<http://sea-bees.com>, www.palm-garden-resort.com)

South East Asia Divers, October 2002, Sue Sepelak (sepelak@erols.com), **Columbia, MD.** Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F. Dives logged: 550. Near end of monsoon season. First day was raining but cleared and was sunny. Monsoon rain usually does not alter visibility, only the monsoon wind does. Dived Rachi Yai, Rachi Noi, King cruiser wreck, and Shark Point. Each dive site had different topography. Sea life was abundant, including large numbers of moorish idols, lionfish, king angels, parrotfish, sea turtles, and leopard sharks. Beautiful variety of hard and soft corals. Excellent dive operation with Southeast Asia Divers. Dive boat was spacious and comfortable and perfectly laid out for divers and their gear. Friendly and competent staff. Lunch was provided, as was transportation to and from hotel. (www.phuketdive.net)

Warm Water Divers, Felix Karon Hotel, January 2003, Carl Scott (cdscott@swbell.net), **Spring, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. Warm Water Divers owns no boats. They contract with reputable dive operators and are reliable, offer extensive destination options each day, and take their fee from the operator instead of the client. Dived with Siam Adventure Tours in the Similans (they get the award for the best boats and service including onboard marine biologist), Santana

Divers (good operation, but most staff a bit stuffy), and Euro Divers (not the nicest boat, but great and fun staff who know how to find the critters for their clients). When one operator had a problem, Warm Water immediately contacted me to make arrangements for an alternate the next day and cheerfully refunded the price difference. All operators had no more than four divers per DM, and I had my own private guide more than once. The Similans offered the most consistently good diving, with impressive, healthy reefs of various hard and soft corals so thick you couldn't see rock in many areas. Vis always good. Phi Phi Islands were also great, with excellent diversity. King Cruiser wreck was a bit disappointing, with 30 feet (or worse) vis, but some interesting creatures. Anemone Reef and Shark Point are must-do's, because of the healthy reefs and abundant life. Thailand's Andaman Sea is a great value on some world-class diving. Food is cheap, hotels are many and can be quite reasonably priced. Service is overall some of the best you'll find anywhere. Large rinse buckets were provided, along with ample room on all boats for safe storage between dives, though no dedicated table/area for cameras. Overall rating is boosted by subject matter, as evidenced by my results (groups.msn.com/scottdiving). Would have been a 5 with more macro stuff. Low diver-to-guide ratios made it easy to take your time with great photo ops. (www.warmwaterdivers.com)

West Coast Divers, Duangjith Resort, March 2002, Anne Warburton, Yorba Linda, CA. Vis: 50 to 60 feet.

Water: 78 to 80 F. Dives accrued: 150-160. Dive restrictions enforced: Swim with DM. Many, many fish: leopard shark, huge triggers, many and varied nudibranches, sting rays, clouded moray eel, schooling bannerfish, whiskered pipe fish, lion fish, raggy stonefish, black spotted porcupine fish, sweet lips, big fin reef squid, great anemones and coral. Could not dive without a DM in front of group and one in back. Finally told them we would not dive with them on third and last day if they didn't leave us alone, and they did. Water pretty silty. Dive boat a two-story and filled with maybe 40 people — a mess getting in the water. Lots and lots of sea life. (www.westcoastdivers.com, www.duangjit.com)

VIETNAM

Nha Trang

CoCo Divers, Vien Dong Hotel, April 2002, Anne Warburton, Yorba Linda, CA. Vis: 90 to 100 feet. Dives accrued: 150-160. Dive restrictions enforced: Go with DM. Boats were old but getting new ones as we left. Heard dynamiting of reefs in distance. Reefs were in poor condition at Hon Nun. Even saw several dead fish in water. Many nudibranchs, feather stars, starfish, yellow tube worms, needle shrimp, ghost crab, lion fish, polka dot groupers, sweet lips, drum bat fish. Coral in terrible shape. CoCo Divers said they were trying to educate people in Vietnam regarding not dynamiting. (www.cocodivecenter.com)

Indian Ocean & Red Sea Live-Aboards

INDONESIA

Baruna Adventurer, April 2002, Linda Dunn (deep66@earthlink.net), Riverside, CA. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 79-82 F. Dives logged: 230. Indonesia has great dive sites. Not many Americans — we were the only two — all other divers Asian. Crew on Baruna wonderful. Macro stuff fantastic. Saw a cuttlefish that was brighter than any neon sign. Bali is exotic and beautiful — topside attractions excel. (www.baruna.com)

Kararu Sea Safari, April 2003, William Deertz (wdeertz@centrin.net.id), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 75 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm. Very comfortable boat with ensuite facilities. Splurge and get the upper deck cabins. Nice to have the back deck area to chill out between dives and in the evening with a nice glass of wine. Food was very good. 7 day trip from Bali to Komodo and back to Bali. Diving between Bali until you get to Komodo wasn't as good as in the park. On 7 day trip only had 2.5 days in Komodo park. Tradeoff to flying to BIM or Labuanbajo and doing entire 7 day trip in Komodo park. Along Sumbawa several interesting sites with black volcanic sand. Coral/fish life generally in very good to excellent condition. Well worth the trip. Adequate camera/charging station in saloon. (www.kararu.com)