



# Turtle News

Issue 7

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## WOW SHARK !!



This year's annual Easter pilgrimage took 13 audacious Adventure Divers to the Land of a Thousand Smiles. Following the excitement and high drama of last year's trip to the Philippines it was widely hoped that the confines of an 85 foot live-aboard vessel would provide limited scope for misbehaviour and maximum opportunity for some truly world-class diving ... thankfully, on both counts, we were not to be disappointed.

The journey to Thailand is arduous enough to drive anyone to drink, and during a 4-hour lay-over at Istanbul that's exactly what happened. Beer and peanut fights ensued and fears of deportation were growing be-

fore we had even left Europe. In Bangkok we encountered a first minor crisis when a senior member of the party realised that he had left the return tickets on the plane !! Finally we arrived at Phuket where we were united with Ian and Andrea who, it would appear, had been indulging in a spot of facial radiation therapy. From here we were transferred to Genesis, our home for the next 9 days and 10 nights and after a quick briefing we departed amid a spectacular fanfare of ceremonial firecrackers.

The overnight journey would take us to our first dive site - the legendary Similian Islands. The dramatic topside terrain of

lush rainforests provided just a hint of what lay below the surface. Our first early morning dive was at East of Eden took the form of the usual checkout dive but it was great just to be back in warm tropical waters. Unfortunately it seemed as though we had brought some typical English weather with us ... over cast and threatening rain. After the checkout dive we moved on to the Surin Marine National Park, a series of five granite islands just north of the Similians. The weather still hadn't perked up and the visibility at our third dive site, Koh Tachai, was poor. However, this had its rewards and

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just a few minutes into the dive we spotted the unmistakable silhouette of a Manta Ray. It glided past and circled around us before disappearing back into the gloom. Hopefully this would be the first of many. As I turned back to the reef I noticed Ray, just the other side of a boulder, flapping and waving his arms about wildly. I quickly swam over to lend assistance and found my buddy wrestling with a giant Feather Star, which had somehow managed to attach itself to just about every part of exposed wet suit. One suspects that our illustrious leader's buoyancy control may have faltered for a moment...?

Overnight we continued our journey north and at the crack of squeak, woke to find ourselves at the world famous Richelieu Rock. A giant pinnacle rising steeply from the 30 mtr sandy bottom and barely breaking the surface at low tide, Richelieu is undoubtedly one of the best dive sites in the Andaman Sea and legendary as a predictable location for Whale Shark sightings. Needless to say, our expectations were high. We made three dives on Richelieu that day and each one was suitably impressive. The underwater seascape was stunning, huge boulders covered in brilliant soft corals, sea whips and fans. Out in the blue, giant Barracuda, Fusillier, Tuna and Trev-eley were plentiful. As the sunlight broke through, the shallower parts of the reef came alive. We spotted a beautiful juvenile Koran Angelfish, several dainty Boxfish, a very impressive White-mouthed Moray and an absolutely stunning Ornate Ghost Pipefish, almost perfectly camouflaged against the coral backdrop. However, there was still one major ingredient missing ... Whale Sharks.

On board *Genesis* we were all settling into the liveaboard life style quite nicely and the predictable routine of eating, sleeping and diving was proving to be most agreeable. From a tiny galley, no larger than your average cupboard-under-the-stairs, the cook was rustling up what can only be described as gourmet Thai cuisine. The weather had also improved dramatically - hardly a cloud to be seen, barely a breath of wind and midday temperatures that would drive even the most hardened sun worshiper into the shade. Everything was shaping up quite nicely as we crossed into Burma.

By day four we had reached the Burma Banks, a series of under water hills that are so far off shore that they can only be reached by the biggest liveaboards. Without a speck of land visible in any



direction this is a truly remote diving experience. We dived Silver Bank, the shallowest of the four but still some 15-17 mts below the surface at its highest point. The emphasis here was supposed to be on sharks but apart from a well fed Nurse Shark and a few White Tip Reef Sharks it was a bit disappointing on the pelagic front. However, the Banks are swept by abrasive currents, which have created gothic-like hard coral cathedrals some are over 5 mts across and have been dated at over 1,000 years old ... far more impressive than sharks !!

The following day we arrived at Black Rock and in the early morning light the water felt cold and imposing. As we rounded the corner I spotted 3 White Tip Reef Sharks circling just up ahead. We fought against the current to secure a good vantage point and were well rewarded when a beautiful Leopard Shark swam within a few feet of us. Heading back along the wall 5 Silver Tip Sharks were enjoying their morning clean and just to top it all off a majestic Manta Ray drifted past in the blue. Black Rock quickly became our favourite dive site of the trip. We made a further 5 dives on the site over the next couple of days and Manta sightings became common place. On one dive there were 3 Mantas circling, each a good 3-4 mts across. They were seductive and seemed to beckon you further and further out into the blue. It was easy to become disorientated and on one dive we lost contact with the reef completely and had to be rescued by the Zodiac.

It was difficult to leave Black Rock and head back south, but our next site, Shark Cave, proved to be just as impressive. Half way along the wall the rock face opens up into a spectacular canyon creating an amazing underwater amphitheatre and providing a home to 3 large Grey Reef Sharks. Securing a front row spot we watched the sharks circling, often no more than a few feet away. The canyon eventually became a cave and battling against a surging current we exited on to the other side of the pinnacle where a fantastic coral garden awaited exploration.

It is well known that the currents in Thailand are often quite strong and on day 7 we were to find out just how challenging they can be. At a site called Kyunn Ba we were warned to expect a bit of current ... A BIT !?! Descending through pea soup (viz. 5-10 mts at best) we eventually caught a glimpse of the reef whistling past. I quickly switched my torch on and turned to face the direction of travel, just in time to see a giant boulder looming out of the gloom. The current sped us along, up, over, around and quite often into rocks. There was no time to think or adjust, at 5 knots plus you just had to go with it. After about 15 minutes of madness we hit a quite patch of water and had time to catch our breath, then we were off again ... but this time it was downwards !! I was adding air to my BCD and still descending with my bubbles going down past me. The current suddenly abated and then I found myself going upwards at an alarming rate of knots. When I finally brought the situation under control I was at 30 mts with 1 minute of deco left on my very distressed computer. It was time to get the hell out of here. Back on the surface divers were scattered far and wide, anyone who had managed to stay with their buddy had done exceptionally well.

On the last day of the trip we returned to Richelieu Rock for a last roll of the dice with the Whale Sharks ... expectations were running high. A few minutes into the dive I emerged from beneath a rocky overhang and caught sight of Gary gesticulating wildly just out in the blue ... this could only mean one thing. Sure enough just off the reef, there it was, my first Whale Shark ... AWESOME !! He circled around just out in the blue making effortless work of the persistent current. We all hung out on the line like flags on a pole, just watching in wonder. I felt immensely privileged to have experienced such a truly amazing sight and it is a moment that I will never forget.

Words & Pictures By Lesley Clark

## Red Sea Ravers



Sharm Alert !! Sharm Alert !! ... oh no, here we go again. Well why not, guaranteed great weather, guaranteed great diving and guaranteed great fun with the bunch of ravers that it was my misfortune to be in charge of. We were staying (as usual) at the excellent Ocean Club, just a short but hellish taxi journey away from the cosmopolitan throng of Namma Bay Central. Our dive guide was once again Massachusetts Mike, who it would seem, is still unsure of the difference between God and a PADI Course Director. Our dive boat for the week was the ample Delphenius with her exceptionally helpful crew and fantastic sponge cake.

Easy first dive on Day 1 at Ras Katy, for general acclimatisation and more particularly for our two open water virgins (Debbie and Yasmin). No problems on the dive just a touch of mid-water unicycling !! Dive two at Fiddle Garden. Both virgins did well with mask clearing and stayed a respectful distance as I pointed out a beautiful (but of course deadly) textile cone shell. On the second day at Middle Garden I was confident that we would have no problems, the virgins seemed to be getting their act together quite nicely. The first dive was going just fine, 9 metres and a nice sandy bottom for mask flood and clear. Virgin Debbie had just flooded her mask when suddenly BANG !!! The o-ring on virgin Yasmin's tank let go before my very ears ... made me jump, I can tell you !! It was like a jacuzzi down there ... I quickly stuck Yasmin on Luke's octopus, shut off her air and shunted

them both to the surface. So much for an easy day !! All credit to Yasmin who handled the incident exceptionally well and was back in the water with a fresh tank in a matter of minutes. Fortunately the second dive held no further surprises and with all of the skills completed the virgins had certainly earned their certifications. Well done Debbie and Yasmin, it was a pleasure.

But what's this ... more work ? Nessy it seems, has an affinity with the dark side and was looking for any excuse to flash his new Custom Divers light sabre. He absolutely insisted that I conduct a Night Diving Specialty and what's more had recruited 4 ultra keen (never dived in the dark before) buddies to back him up. Needless to say I had to give into their desires and so it was that I found myself back at Ras Katy in the pitch of night with 5 over enthusiastic Jedi Knights (namely Nessy, Jugs, Yoda, Sturdy and Uncle Bob). It turned out to be one of the best dives of the week thanks to the appearance of a magnificent White Tip Reef Shark ... Awesome !!

Day 3, Deep Diver Specialty. I briefed the gang to check their gauges and no decompression limits frequently, set a maximum dive depth of 35 metres and took the plunge. Everyone was very comfortable but of course it was all too easy to tempt the weaker willed deeper. Dive two, at last a relaxing pleasure dive. Luke and I hung out with the Garden Eels for a while before continuing along the gently sloping wall. A huge Napoleon Wrasse drifted past

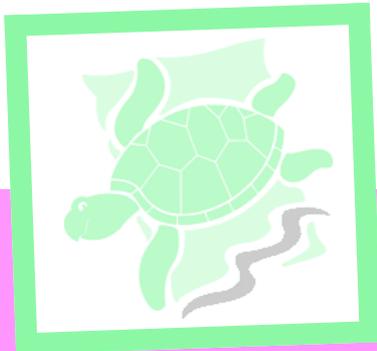
just above us. Yoda spotted a magnificent Leopard Shark sleeping at the bottom of the wall. Mike and I dropped down to gently wake him up. He cruised up the wall right past the group and stopped to check out Penny before returning to his bed. It was one of those nice moments as an instructor.

That evening, once again, instead of enjoying a cold Sakara at the Ocean Club bar I was overseeing the Jedi Knights on their quest for the PADI Night Diver Specialty. Tonight we had to make two dives so there was definitely no chance of

making it back early for a beer !! On the first dive Sturdy almost performed an involuntary emergency buoyant ascent after a highly curious Lionfish appeared just inches from her hand (how I laughed). Night navigation exercises were completed without any problems.



We finished off the skills on the second dive and spent the rest of the time watching Nessy feed the Lionfish with his light sabre (very Project Aware). Day 4, Straits of Tiran and back to the Deep Diver Specialty, which was to be followed by my second and last pleasure dive of the trip. A few of the group



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took the opportunity for a third dive, I took the opportunity to catch some sun and restore my batteries ... we were off to the Thistlegorm in the morning.

Following the usual ridiculously early start we arrive at the remote site, just northeast of Shag Rock, to find choppy seas and a fairly stiff current ... great !! Got everyone kitted up, put a few lines in place to assist with movements on the surface and off we went.

Everyone did well in the testing surface conditions and we were quickly in the calm of the 5 metres zone, looking down on one of the most awesome sights in life ... The Thistlegorm - intact, upright and perfectly ship-shape. We completed the skills in the shadow of the huge bronze prop and then headed off to explore. On dive two we ventured inside and despite the heavy traffic everyone seemed suitably impressed by the trucks and motorcycles.

Back on board Delphenius the party was in full swing. By now everyone was getting on like chest hairs on fire and we were still laughing uproariously at Luke's pants, which had miraculously appeared at the top of the flag pole overnight !! Surely the Jedi Knight divers couldn't have anything to do with this ??

The next day it was off to Ras Mohammed's Shark and Yolanda reefs to wrap up the Deep Specialty and start the Underwater Naturalist course (possibly misheard). And so we spent the final two

dives of the holiday fish bothering and coral spotting. There was plenty of life - Morays, Turtles, Blue Spotted Rays, a couple of Nudibranchs and all of the usual stuff. Stingray Station made the perfect end to the trip, an easy shallow pinnacle with lots of variety and a friendly resident Napoleon Wrasse.



On the way back to Namma Bay we played Twister on deck (very mature). So to the finale at the infamous Camel Bar in Namma Bay Central. With no more diving to be done we drank Tequila, fought with ice and bombarded each other with monkey nuts. As the evening wore on we boogied on down and in the wee small hours eventually drifted off home to bed.

Day 7, 19 dives, 26 certifications and 2 Master Scuba Divers later I rested.

Many thanks to everyone who made it such a fantastic trip - Yoda, Jugs, Penny, Nussy, Duran Duran, Debbie, Yasmin, Goat, Sturdy, Uncle Bob, Son, Roy and Carol.

*Words By Mother (A.K.A. Lesley Clark)*

*Pictures By Goat and Yoda*

## Courses

<b>Advanced Open Water</b>	- Orientation 25th July - Open Water 27th & 28th July - Orientation 12th September - Open Water 14th & 15th September
<b>Dry Suit Specialty</b>	- Orientation 22nd July - Open Water 27th July - Orientation 9th September - Open Water 14th September
<b>Enriched Air Nitrox</b>	- Academics 25th July & 12th Sept - Open Water 28th July & 15th Sept
<b>Rescue Diver, Medic First Aid &amp; DAN O2 Provider</b>	- Academics 6th, 7th & 19th Sept - Pool 5th, 7th & 12th Sept - Open Water 8th, 21st & 22nd Sept
<b>Divemaster</b>	- Commencing October
<b>Assistant Instructor &amp; Instructor Development</b>	- By Arrangement ... At any time !!

**TO BOOK ON ANY OF THESE COURSES OR FOR ALTERNATIVE DATES, PLEASE CALL RAY, LESLEY OR LUKE AT THE DIVE CENTRE.**

## Congratulations

### Open Water

David Norton, Mark Gallagher, David Major, Sarah O'Neill, Robert Harrison, Billy Hughes, Burak Gunduz,, Janine Pringle, David White, Jude Hebden, Greg Cottenden, Liz Spencer, Joe Castellano, James Hurley, Karen Law, David Durrant, Mark Corbett

### Advanced Open Water

Gemma Williams, Cathy Williams, Chris Edwards, Paul Warwick-Munday, Joanne Brett, David Brett, Sarah Corrigan, Sarah Cox, David Norton

### Rescue & MFA

Bob Higlett, Mitch Compton, Nicola Read, Hugh Williams, Nick Burbridge, Karen Jakes, Dave Bell

### Dry Suit Specialty

Rob Forey, Steve Forey, Gemma Williams, Paul Read, Debbie Bartleman, Ben Foster, Sarah Cox, Philip Stanning, David Norton, Sarah O'Neill, Tonia Buxton, Jamie Harris, Deborah Cummings

### Enriched Air Nitrox

Dave Mingay, Dave Bell, Ben Foster, Mitch Compton, Nick Burbridge, Nicola Read, David Norton,

### Divemasters

Neil Mickelburgh