

Sawasdee (Hello)!

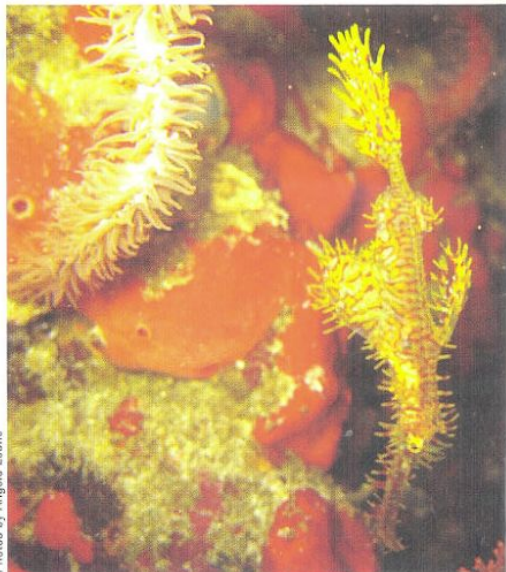
by Angelo Leone

The intoxicating mix of skill and adventure that is SCUBA diving recently lured twenty members of the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC), with the promise of exotic adventures in beautiful natural settings, from the overcast skies of Belgium to Phuket, Thailand. One of the commonly rated top-ten dive destinations in the world, the Similan Islands of the Andaman Sea, proved to be nothing short of paradise. Comprising nine granite islands covered in tropical jungle, washed by a clear blue tropical ocean, the islands provided some of the best scenery and diving in Thailand.

Making their trip even more exciting, the group lived aboard the June Hong Chian Lee, one of only a few junks built in Penang, Malaysia. Built in 1962 and originally used for transport cargo, "The Junk" (www.thejunk.com) was completely restored in 1997 and set up as a live-aboard vessel. For those of you who saw and remember the James Bond movie, 'The Man with the Golden Gun', the June Hong Chian Lee was the junk used at the end of the movie. It will also be featured in a soon-to-be-released John Cusack and Gong Li movie, 'Shanghai'.

Among the 20 SSAC members participating, nationalities represented were American (9), British (2), Canadian (1), German (4), Polish (2), Spanish (1) and Turkish (1). There was also a diversity of ability

and experience: NAUI Instructor (1), CMAS 3-Star (3), NAUI Master Diver (2), NAUI Advanced (9), BSAC Dive Leader (2) and NAUI Basic (3). Newly-certified basic divers Tony Greco, Sarah Noble and Hilal Tosun were treated to some of the most colourful and varied marine life of the Andaman Sea. These, along with several other divers, earned their qualifications through SSAC, learning the intricacies of scuba diving in the SHAPE swimming pool and Belgian quarries. The Similan Islands' crystal waters and abundant marine life provided a stunning contrast to the distant memory of the often murky, cold quarry waters in which they were trained. For underwater photographers and lovers of marine life, it was difficult to surpass the variety and abundance of tropical fish. All of the standard marine life was present such as lionfish, moray eels, turtles,



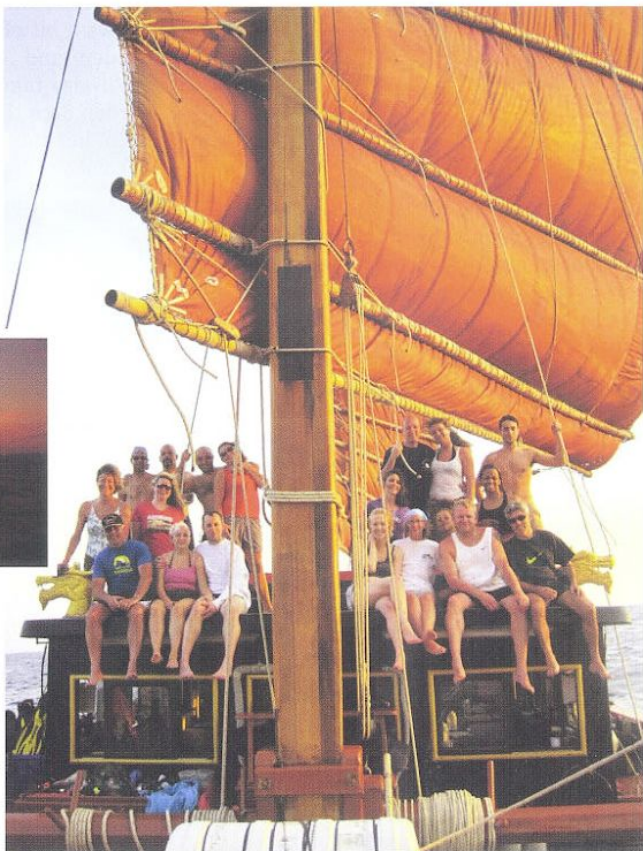
Photos by Angelo Leone

△ Ghost Pipefish.

lobster, triggerfish, nudibranch, puffer fish and clown fish. At times there were so many fish surrounding the divers it was difficult to see. "I



△ Helping to raise the sails.



The staff of the junk were outstanding in their attentiveness and their professionalism. The cook of the junk was a favourite of all the divers, providing a wide variety of delectable Thai cuisine, including fish caught daily off the boat. This was an experience even for such an internationally-diverse group. One staff provided a unique wake-up call each morning by mimicking a rooster crowing as he passed through the hall of the cabins. Scuba diving requires a lot of equipment, much of it very heavy. The staff took care while loading and unloading all 20 sets of gear during our 18 dives. Not an easy feat by any means.

All divers would agree that the highlight of the trip was the sunset sail. The crew of the junk enlisted the help of several able-bodied divers to raise the sails to their full glory. As we sailed into the sunset, which had been perfect every evening, but seemed even more so on this evening, the wind filled the sails of this awesome ship and a sense of true unbelieving of our good fortune came over us.

SSAC instructor Angelo Leone was the mastermind behind the trip, managing all details and executing an unforgettable, memorable trip for all participants. SSAC has over 70 members and offers scuba courses at low cost to the SHAPE community. For more information on SSAC courses or upcoming trips, visit their website at www.shapesubaqua.com or email shapesubaqua@yahoo.com. Of the entire experience, John Orr best sums it up; "It's an escape to the end of the world and then 30 meters below the surface!"



△ Cuttlefish.



△ Colleen Thompson - living in an aquarium.

repeatedly had the feeling of being in an aquarium," said Mellie Thorne with a broad smile. Some of the

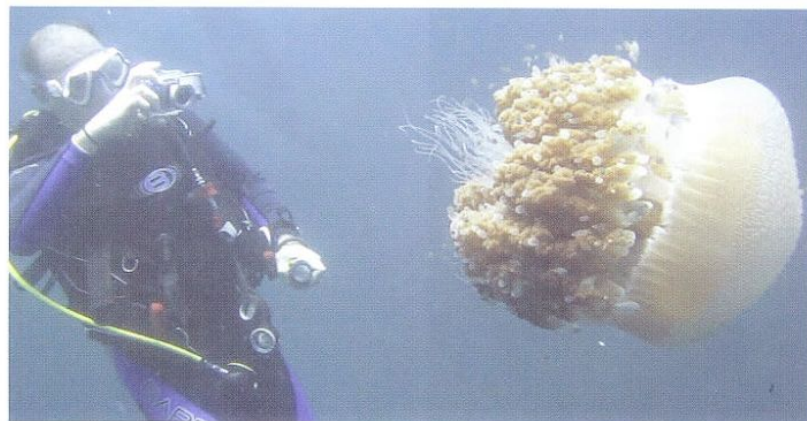
cleaner wrasse fish were more than a little friendly and occasionally hazarded a peck to divers' ears. "I didn't think I needed my ears cleaned, but I guess the fish decided I did!" remarked basic diver Hilal Tosun.

Although it was not a 'big fish' paradise, leopard sharks made several appearances. This was more than compensated for by the abundance of unique and diverse marine life. Experienced with over 350 dives, avid underwater photographer, Sergiusz Mnacakanjan summed it up this way; "There were a lot of different species, many very rare, unique, and difficult to spot. This presented a bit of a challenge, but was very rewarding." Our three dive guides were expert at assisting in finding ghost pipe fish, frog fish, harlequin shrimp and sea horses. Debbie Rose, who reached her 150th dive on the penultimate day, had this to say; "The pair of leopard sharks was amazing as I had never seen them before. They looked so placid, yet menacing and had amazing colouring. The black tipped reef sharks and turtles were so close. The mating cuttlefish were fascinating to watch, especially as the male seemed to be protecting one of the females.

And I must mention the seahorse at 30 meters; tiny, yellow, beautiful. I would have never found it on my own - great guides!" One dive offered a unique sighting of a lone giant jellyfish.

It appeared to be lazily surging through the open water with an entourage of fish, having the appearance of a bored celebrity. It sure attracted our attention!

Aside from the marine life, the underwater terrain was also very unique. In addition to beautiful coral reefs and fringe, there were enormous granite boulders. Richelieu Rock was a favourite dive site of many of the divers due to its huge boulders which created a giant's maze. "It was a humbling feeling to be next to such monolithic rocks," stated Chris Rose.



△ Angelo Leone and giant jellyfish!