

SHAPE Sub Aqua Club: Whale Sharks, Elephants and a Diving Family

Really, What More Could You Ask For?!

By Lynne Strickland (CAN - Civ)

Having moved here last August and becoming members of the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC) even before our arrival, our family has been fortunate to take full advantage of this amazing club. This January we went on our second trip with the SSAC but it was a culmination of a fall and winter schedule of preparation. Many friends and colleagues have expressed that they used to dive, or wish to dive and our family is an example of just how awesome an opportunity it is to have the SSAC team of volunteer instructors and master divers here on base.



△The junk

past wonderfully renovated for liveaboard diving that the club had sailed on twice before. Such a success, the demand to go back was the reason for this trip. You should check out the photo wall just inside the club on base to see all the various locations the SSAC has traveled to – it truly is extensive.

We settled into our double, triple and quad rooms (each with an ensuite bathroom) and overnight brought us to the first of five days of typically three day and one night dive per day. Split into four dive groups, each with an experienced dive guide, our days were filled with underwater adventures and above water feasts, naps and dive gear checks. And for some, absorbing as much Thai sunshine as possible!

Our dive route in the Andaman Sea had us stopping at the Similan and

Surin Islands with our northern most stop at Richelieu Rock where we were able to conduct all four day and night dives – the only other time in twelve years that our head guide had experienced being able to do that.

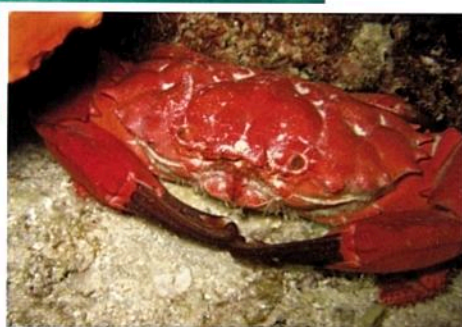
We were lucky with both weather and seas, and even the lack of other dive groups in the water with us. And underwater, well, it was at times indescribable. The best we could approach it in our dive logs was to mark new sea life along with the words “I am diving in the best stocked underwater aquarium”.



△Meghan and Nicole through the underwater rock tunnel

Our two teenaged daughters had never dove. So we started off with the SSAC's try-dive at the SHAPE pool. With an appointment set, the girls were geared up with equipment from the club and coached by NAUI Instructor Angelo Leone through an introduction to diving. Good to go, the girls then went on to complete their NAUI Basic SCUBA Diver course through the certified instructors in the club, with dives at the pool and then at two Belgian dive sites. Soon after, the girls and I went on to the Advanced SCUBA Diver course, and my husband and I took the NITROX Diver course. The bonus – we had signed up for the club's November trip to Hurghada, Egypt and completed all the mandatory course dives in the Red Sea amongst sting rays, shipwrecks and forty odd divers from SHAPE past and present. Really, what more could you ask for?!

Well, how about this – a live-aboard dive trip in Thailand followed by a week of exploring “nearby” areas of Cambodia's Angkor Wat and northern Thailand's mountainous Chiang Mai area. Twenty members of the SSAC, some currently at SHAPE, some at postings and locations elsewhere, converged in Phuket, Thailand and transported to Patong on the Andaman Sea to board “The Junk,” an authentic transport vessel of the



△Cube boxfish



△A school of fish make way for Meghan

This trip had something for expert and novice diver alike. Reef dives, an underwater “jungle gym” of rock formations with swim through tunnels and playing hide and seek with the currents. Since having dove more dives now with the club than I had previously, I notice I am able to see more each time. The intricate details of the tiny nudibranch, known for their vibrant colours. Tentacles peeking out from rocky outcrops where lobsters cram themselves into shallow openings. On a night dive, the spectacle of what looked like decorative lights on black sea urchins were in fact the reflection of many eyes belonging to shrimp who huddle there. The magic of watching an octopus move, changing as it moves to finally blend into its new location.

And more...a tiny bright orange seahorse, a large camera adverse crab, schools and lone barracudas moving past without a care. A manta ray, gliding above us with its wingspan blocking out the light, an amazingly graceful creature. The adorable cube box fish, sometimes in bright yellow with polka dots, red-toothed trigger fish (and they are), Oriental and Andaman sweetlips, and my favourite, the shy, almost dog like porcupine puffer fish.

And the big ticket, the whale shark, who passed once, twice and back the next dive for more. It glided by me and I swam along with it under its belly, watching the remora fish cling and clean its side. On another pass I had to move out of the way to avoid its tail as it turned to venture off. Experiences that will stay with me and have likely raised my expectations for more dives to come! We were good-naturedly chastised by far more experienced divers who informed us it took them



△Similan Island - yup - this is paradise



△Happy nudibranch

over 500 dives to see their first whale shark. We bore their admonishment with grins.

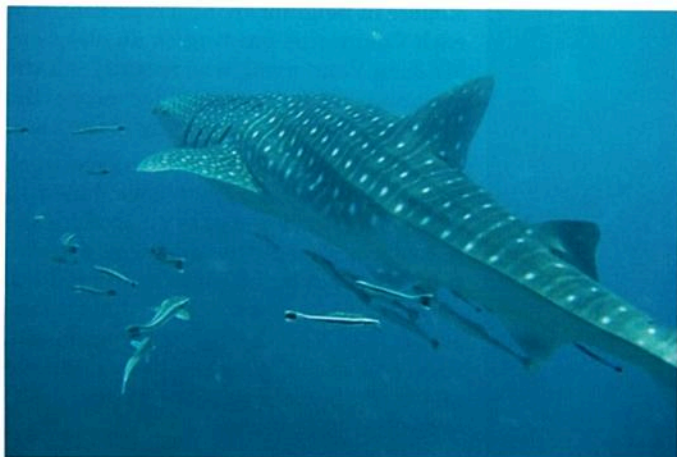
Part way through the trip we stopped off on Similan Island and took a quick hike up the rocks for a view of a lagoon from paradise, The Junk and seas beyond.

Too soon, the week was coming to an end. On the final day we joined the crew for the raising of the sails and jumped in the dinghy for a view of the grandeur of our ship sailing the

Andaman Sea under full sail. Impressive. A celebratory night, we shared stories and photos as the sails came down and we set off back to Patong. A full week together brought to mind a comment made by one of the SSAC members I had met at the club’s fall barbeque – he said that he went on his first trip with the SSAC as a member and came back as part of the family. Our family of four has now grown and it’s a good family to belong to!

Although our diving was over, the next week was just beginning. Too much for this article, another will follow with more about Angkor Wat and the temples and sights of northern Thailand – that’s where the elephants come in! The SSAC is known as much for its dive trips as its terrific side trips. I’ve never been on better organized adventures.

If you’ve ever thought of learning to dive, challenging your dive skills or joining a dive club that offers fantastic instructors and amazing trips at remarkable prices, well you’ve got it here right on SHAPE. To find out more, visit www.shapesubaqua.com. Because really, whether trying it for the first time or just being able to do what you love, what more could you ask for?!



△Whale Shark - close enough to touch!



△SHAPE Sub Aqua Club and The Junk under full sail