

: LOUISE MURRAY

> I'VE JUST SPENT A COUPLE OF WEEKS ON THAT OLD TROJAN OF THE ANDAMAN SEA SIMILAN ISLAND CIRCUIT, MV SCUBA CAT, OPERATED BY SCUBA CAT DIVING ON PHUKET ISLAND IN THE SOUTH OF THAILAND. THE NINE ISLANDS OF THE SIMILAN MARINE NATIONAL PARK LIE 90 KMS NORTH WEST OF PHUKET AND APART FROM TWO RANGER HUTS, ARE UNINHABITED EXCEPT FOR RAINFOREST DWELLING SQUIRRELS, MONKEYS, BATS AND BIRDS. EASTERN COASTS ARE DOMINATED BY GENTLE REEF SLOPES, WHILE IN THE WEST, GIGANTIC GRANITIC BOULDERS OFFER DRAMATIC UNDERWATER TOPOGRAPHY WITH LOTS OF SWIM THROUGHES.

CATCHING THE COLOURS OF NIGHT

The venerable liveaboard may seem like an unusual choice for a professional photographer, but it is one of the most perfect and stable platforms for underwater work that I know. Having spent almost a month aboard during the late nineties, I was keen to see both how she was doing and revisit the immensely varied life of the marine protected area.

Little had changed, there is still tons of back deck space and the vast saloon is a perfect area for downloading, and working on pictures and housings. A new crew includes Deng, the pony tailed and ever helpful engineer (who helped to fix various bits of kit); Chay, chief of the back deck crew, and Captain Pip, all of whom are great in accommodating delicate cameras, weird requests and endless dives.

Mercifully for my digestive system, tested close to destruction on my last visit, there was a huge improvement in the food. I will never forget eating one plate of spaghetti bolognaise Thai style, served up ten years ago containing 22 raw

cloves of garlic. Now, prawns, fish and plenty of chicken dishes are served up in enormous quantities in a mix of both western and Thai cuisine by cooks Guy and Nui.

Accommodation on board is basic with 12 fan cooled, bunk bedded cabins and shared showers and toilets, but given the amount of time I was spending in the water (over five hours a day), I certainly found it perfectly adequate as I got into a dive, sleep, eat, dive routine.

The Similans is a guaranteed place to see and photograph pairs of cryptically gorgeous ghost pipefish hanging in the branches of gorgonian fans and is a macro photographer's delight. Numerous cleaning stations are staffed by multiple species of cleaner shrimp plying their trade. Green and hawksbill turtles are a common sight, as are schooling barracuda, mantis shrimp and octopus in the western sites.

In March and April, Thailand's hottest period before the monsoon breaks, a plankton bloom brings in whale sharks

