

lobsters and crabs, along with the usual tropical reef critters. Very good trip! Rinse tank, and spacious camera table provided. Small air tank available for drying lenses and blowing away those pesky drops of water.
(www.seafever.com)

Sea Fever, June 2004, James & Linda Dyer, (jhdyer@mindspring.com), Cleveland, TN. Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 35 to 60 Feet. Water: 85 to 86 Fahrenheit, choppy, no currents. Large, well equipped boat with adequate accommodations. Cabins are a bit cramped and marine heads are shared. Some rooms have in room sinks but most don't. The dive deck while large can get busy when everyone is getting ready. We took 18 people but still had enough room to spread out and find our own space. The sun deck got a good workout. The crew was friendly and helpful. Meals were good and plentiful. Dry table and separate rinse tub provided for equipment. Dry table becomes a gathering place for anything and everything during the trip. Underwater video playback using video system in main salon. Storage shelf in main salon with adequate space for battery recharging.

Sea Fever, August 2004, Tom Vetter, Phoenix, AZ. Prior to our trip my wife and I purchased new regulators and BC's. When we got home I had rust in my new first stage. A drift dive led by a crew member, an open water diver, was in excess of 100 feet. He held a line connected to a float so the boat could follow the dive group, but exceed decompression limits and had to make

a decompression stop. We dove our own profile and had no problems. Crew members not always on the deck while divers are in the water.

Shearwater, August 2004, Woody Stene (marinestene@aol.com) Marine on St. Croix, MN. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 Fahrenheit, calm. Based in Riviera Beach, north of West Palm Beach. Converted V-hull, with space for 12. We only had 5. Accommodations would be tight with a full load. All bunks are over/under singles, with 2 each in 3 small cabins and the rest in sort of a dormitory in the front of the boat. Sleeping space was good, but storage tight. Bring minimal soft luggage; if you have large dive bags, you store them at the office. They have a lot to park your car or it's a \$20 cab ride from PBI airport. They usually frequent the northwestern Bahamas above Grand Bahama island. We got a tiger shark dive, which was unforgettable. They also did more conventional reef shark dives, with plenty of shark action. They didn't actually feed the sharks, but attract them with chum baskets which pulled lots of them in but kept things manageable. We also got to swim with dolphins and the crew had a couple of scubascooters to play with the critters and keep them around the boat. Lots of nice coral formations, and wreck diving on the Sugar Schooner was great fun, especially at night. Food was great, with buffet service. Snacks were available, and entrees were interesting, with fresh hogfish one night. One of our gang brought up several conch and then laboriously cleaned

them and turned them into conch salad! There was a soda wand on the back deck, and passengers brought their own booze. The first drink of the day was also the end of diving for that day. The staff accommodated our needs, and while they were there to watch over the less experienced, they let the veterans do their own thing. When my wife's regulator experienced a weird O ring failure, they got her a regulator from one of the crew. They are involved with ocean preservation and we got in on their baby sea turtle release, which they do every trip during the hatching season. Boat was definitely geared to photographers, and we had several advanced camera rigs in operation. Two large dedicated rinse tanks available, and ample charging facilities. Staff was helpful with camera handling, and computer reviews of the day's digital images were a nightly affair.
(www.scuba-adventures.com)

BELIZE

Aggressor, April 2004, Ron Steckel (rsteckel@sbcglobal.net), San Jose, CA. Vis: 60-80 feet. Water: 76-78 F. Dives logged: 325. Great service and food with a crew willing to help anyway. We only had 12 divers on board, so there was lots of room. The weather was great, although the water seemed cooler than expected with thermoclines dropping it another 4-6 degrees. Few pelagics, maybe 6 or so sharks, but numerous turtles and eagle rays. The coral was healthy and many dives offered swim-throughs. We dove the Blue Hole where everything seemed fine until at 140 feet or so my buddy

Tom got narked and started swimming in circles then charging to the surface. The fast action of the DM snared his fin and got him back under control. A great trip for newbies, in general, and for the more experienced divers to kick back and relax. (www.aggressor.com)

Aggressor, September 2004, Chuck Aldridge, Burnsville, NC. Vis: 60-100 feet. Water: 80-84 F. Dives logged: 250. Great dive operation – professional staff.

Nekton Pilot, April 2004, Karen Guthrie, Laguna Beach, CA.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Water: 79 to 81 F, no currents. The Good: Whole schools of fish (I loved the schools of Creole wrasse best) but there were schools of jacks and other fish too. Beautiful walls, several moving conch, barracuda, goat fish, puffer, nurse shark, box fish, cleaner wrasse and shrimp in business, rays and peacock flounder in the sandy parts, and squid on display on every night dive. Hunting eel on night dive too! Reefs very healthy and beautiful. Great food and great people in the crew and passengers. The Bad: Two count'em two diving accidents. Woman found at 100 feet alone (when she had gone down with 2 buddies) groping the coral. Fellow divers brought her slowly to the surface as she seemed disoriented. She stopped breathing and no pulse could be found. CPR performed by doctor and nurse on board as guests, oxygen and airlift to Belize City from one of the islands. She lived and seemed just fine when she met the boat in Belize City when we got back. She vowed never to let her priority to get to the

gym slip again. Second accident was more minor, but the man was placed on oxygen for rapid breathing and airlifted to Belize City. He was given a chamber treatment, but they decided it was not DCS. He also recovered fully and met the boat when we got back. Tips and things I wish I had known: Their onboard water tasted salty this time (our previous trip with *Nekton Pilot* did not have this problem). Get lots of beverages at the liquor store that they take you to before you get on the boat. Belize City shuts down for four days at Easter. The Raddison will rent you a day room by the hour for \$10 Belize = \$5 US/Hour (I don't know if that is official policy or if we just got a desk clerk with some initiative). Get your air tickets from TACA online. Very cheap! TACA lost one couple's luggage and it was sent out several days into the trip. Storm made the going rough one night and seasick meds were a good idea. Great trip, more schools of fish than the Caymans. Side trip to ruins okay but they are pretty ruined. Belize city is poor, hot and not interesting. (Some poor, hot cities are tremendously interesting but this one didn't seem to have much history, museums, unspoiled cultures, handicrafts, etc.) UW Photography Comments: E6, Light tables, large carpeted camera table, good rinse tanks. (www.nektoncruises.com)

***Sun Dancer II*, February 2004, Mike Garrison (mgarrison@gbutler.com) Leawood, KS.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm, no currents. Peter Hughes runs a quality shop, at least with the *SunDancer II*. This is an excellent oper-

ation. You dive your own profile or you can team with their crew. Nitrox for all dives except the Blue Hole (160 ft) Excellent ship, good size, spacious cabins, excellent food (wine with dinner) and overall a class operation. This is my second live-aboard and both have been outstanding. You are greeted by the captain upon arrival and it only gets better from there on. John and Vlad are excellent divemasters, the crew takes excellent care of you, cabins are clean, spacious, and if you don't leave the *SunDancer II* with an excellent dive experience there must be something wrong with you. I chose a live-aboard for Belize because the dive sites are so spread out. Unfortunately we only dove Turneffe and Lighthouse Key. Apparently the local agreements prevent diving Ambergris and the other localities of Belize, so our dive sites were limited. That was disappointing. We also toured the local museum that gave us a great picture of the local culture. The Belize Zoo is a must, it is in the jungle where the animals are in their natural habitat. Plenty of time to do this on the last day before the afternoon flights. Very supportive for U/W photography. Separate photo tables, separate rinse tanks, advisory and instruction available. Crew produced a digital CD for all of us of the dive, both surface and W/W photos plus music. (www.peterhughes.com)

***Sun Dancer II*, March 2004, Gabriel I. PeZagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com) San Juan, PR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. The vessel is the best I have ever been on and the

crew surpassed all expectations. There was no request that was not promptly and cheerfully attended to. Turnover on live-aboards being what it is, I only regret that those who follow me will not be able to enjoy the ministrations of Captain Lachlan MacKensie and his assistants Sonia Johal and Laura Shepherd. However, local divemaster Raúl Cruz will hopefully still be around. The dive sites were of the highest quality, tropical fish are plentiful and the corals are in magnificent shape. With the exception of the very beginning of the trip, all the sites had a reef and an adjoining wall, therefore, there was something for those who preferred a shallow dive, as well as for those who sought the thrill and beauty of the walls. Diving was at a pace suited to personal preferences. Once the dive briefing concluded, you could dive whatever profile you selected and with whomever you chose, including solo diving. The vessel itself is spotless, the cabins spacious, clean and comfortable, and the food varied and tasty. The *Sun Dancer II* is the standard against which live-aboard diving ought to be measured. The camera tables and rinse tanks were very adequate. Developing and viewing were available.

***Sun Dancer II*, May 2004, Donald Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net) Glendora, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Not any really bad. Would have liked more pelagics. As for the good, the boat is outstanding, large, comfortable rooms with lots of storage space. Excellent diving set up. Walls and coral are super healthy and beauti-

ful. Dive sites just a mile apart can be distinctly different as to number of fish, sizes etc. Saw sharks, leopard rays, morays, lobsters, big groupers, schools of horse eyed jacks, tarpon, large barracuda, large crabs, large spiny puffers. Interesting navigation problem. Boat swings 270 degrees while at anchor and so when you get back to your starting point on a dive, the boat usually isn't there. A bit disconcerting at first, but bye and bye she comes swinging into view. Then, it's best to go for the safety bar while the boat is still heading your way, or use a lot of air trying to catch her if you let her drift by. Not a photographer but those who were seemed quite pleased with the set up.

***Sun Dancer II*, May 2004, Ed Boyer, Webster, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, choppy, no currents. The trip left little to be desired. The captain was not very sociable and seemed to make little effort to know the passengers but the rest of the crew knew and called everyone by first name after the first day. They couldn't have been more friendly and helpful in all respects. However, the first dive one morning found a considerable current not to some divers' liking. Upon being informed, the captain moved the boat for the second morning dive. We were in cabin #9 on the port side aft and had an air compressor located directly below our room. It cycled on and off all night and was quite loud. It made restful sleep impossible but since all other rooms were occupied, moving to another was not an option. We would take this trip

again in a minute with another room. UW Photography Comments: two dedicated camera tables with air outlet were available. The divemasters handed your camera equipment to you in the water and took it from you in the water after the dive.

Sun Dancer II, June 2004, John DeBonis (debo@direcway.com) Midland, VA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 F, choppy. My first live-a-board. Things ran smoothly from the pickup at the airport to the drop off at the end of the week. The boat was in good condition with the rooms being kept clean and beds made daily. Plenty of room onboard to move about during surface intervals. The meals were varied and the food was very good. Breakfast and dinner were served by the crew with lunch being buffet style. Breakfast was cooked to order and on two nights we were given a choices for dinner. There were no dives prior to breakfast and the night dive was after dinner. Wine was served at dinner each night so if you were diving, you could not partake. My first trip to Belize and tropical diving. On my first few dives I found the creatures to be exciting and stunningly beautiful, but by the end of the week I felt like I had seen them all and was ready to move on. The coral appeared healthy and life around them abundant. I found myself getting bored with the diving by the middle of the week but changed dive buddies and was introduced to a whole different world of diving, taking time to slow down and take a closer look at macro life. The crew were friendly and helpful but they

did not go out of their way to do anything extra. Safety was good with a fire drill being done by us all and a nightly watch posted. Exclusive tank onboard for the cameras along with compressed air. Ample space for setup and maintenance of camera.

Sun Dancer II, July 2004, Joni & Bobby Lamb (scubalovers@comcast.net), Richmond Hill, GA. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Awesome trip. Fantastic cook and excellent food! Hot chocolate (with Irish Cream) after the night dive! Meats and veggies are fresh and varied. Desserts and snacks. Unlimited beverages. A great, fun crew made sure all passengers were taken care of (one jerk complained about everything). An excellent dive boat. Plenty of room for everything. A hot shower and warm towel on the dive deck after every dive. Separate camera and equipment rinse tanks on each side of the dive deck. The diving was great with plenty of healthy marine life and corals. We could do 5 dives every day and 2 on the last morning. The two morning dives are at one site, two afternoon and one night dive at another site. Nitrox 32 was \$10/tank or \$150/week. Tank fills 3200 psi every time. Dive our own profile or follow a divemaster. Shore excursion to Half Moon Caye for bird watching is worthwhile. When we got home, our house felt like it was rocking until the following Wednesday.

Sun Dancer II, August 2004, Tita Lamm (titatom@bellsouth.net) Windermere, FL. Experience: 51-100

dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 85 to 90 F, choppy, no currents. My first live aboard, and it was a good experience.

CAYMAN ISLANDS

Aggressor, November 2003, Susan Rae Sampson, Renton, WA. 100+ dives, and Buddy, 1000+ dives. Vis: 100+ ft. Temp. 82-84 F. The fourteen passengers aboard on our cruise was a small enough a group to allow uncrowded diving. The decks are large enough to allow a diver to find solitude in the sun or shade between dives, if desired. Chef Andrew definitely has the touch for serving up good food, well prepared. The crew was consistently attentive and helpful; when my electronic storage device failed, they even allowed me to open a folder on the ship's computer for downloading my photos, then burned them onto a disk for me to take home. Although the boat engines are remarkably quiet, an audible generator has to run night and day; and if rough seas preclude docking at the pier, transit between boat and shore is by dingy, and requires some agility. We took our chances on the weather and lost: we were not able to get to Little Cayman's Bloody Bay Wall. Grand Cayman's dive sites hosted a wide variety of fish, but they were not in super abundance, except at Tarpon Alley, which was teeming with the big guys. We spotted one turtle and many rays. Besides the crew photo pro, a guest photo pro was on board running a digital photo class, and that led to one disturbing situation: in their fervor to get the perfect shot, some of the photo zealots on board were bashing

the reef. We know that the crew are not required to be reef police, so we were gratified to see a crewman reach down and pull a photographer off of the coral. We were also pleased with sound ecological practices on board, right down to issuing each passenger a reusable plastic mug for use throughout the week, to reduce creation of plastic or paper waste; and with the discretion and restraint demonstrated by the captain on the issue of tips (we were happy to leave what we think was a nice one.) (www.aggressor.com)

Aggressor IV, April 2004, Phil & Grace Hampton (gracphil@palmnet.net), Orlando, FL. Vis: 40-80 feet. Water: 76-78 F. Dives logged: Phil — 2,170, Grace — 800. We had hoped to dive the north and east sides of Grand Cayman, but Mother Nature had other ideas. Winds were 15 to 25 knots with small craft warnings from Saturday through Wednesday. So most of our diving was on the west side. Winds died down enough so that we were able to dive the north side Thursday. Captain Tom and his crew of five were outstanding. The crew meshed well and seemed to enjoy working together. The boat was clean and Andrew, the cook, is really a chef! Food was excellent and dietary individual restrictions were handled cheerfully. The diving was typical Caymans, with turtles on almost every dive. Tarpon Alley is a small gully. Five Stars!

Aggressor IV, May 2004, Robin C. Russell, (scubarobin@msn.com), Seattle, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 200 Feet. Water: 81