

Fahrenheit, calm, choppy, surge. I was traveling with two other — we are all in our 40's. I did 23 dives out of a possible of 26. Went to the famous Bloody Bay Wall on Little Cayman and the Russian wreck the Tibbetts on the Brac.. The seas were calm, the visibility crystal clear, the marine life and corals plentiful and the crew and ship amazing. I had the fleet assign me a roommate and we got along great (she gave me the bottom bunk). We became dive buddies and got our Level II certification. My average dive was 45 min., 80 ft (I did several deep dives for certification) and even did the scooters — too much fun! Captain Tom ran a fun, organized and safe ship and all the passengers got along famously such that we gave the crew going away gifts at the going away Crew Party. We were spoiled with a French-trained guest diver chef Marie who made magic in a small boat galley. Warm towels, treats, hot tub, freshwater shower greeted us after every dive. Top deck barbeques (prime rib one night!) and service by the hardworking dive guides/cabin stewards/galley crew (all one and the same) never stopped. Dave and Nick — two of the most hard working, dedicated and fun dive guides you will ever meet. AT&T Wireless works perfect and not nearly as expensive as every other type of communication. Steve was magic with the camera. We enjoyed evening videos of that days dive. The complimentary and purchased DVD's were well worth the money.

Aggressor, August 2004, Preston A Ball (mdleather4ever@ yahoo.com), Flowery Branch, GA. Vis: 100-150

feet. Water: 84-86 F. Dives logged: 225. Our 2nd trip in 6 months and the entire experience is awesome. This is the friendliest, hardest working, most down-to-earth, and fun crew of any live-aboard I've been on. The diving, service, food, and accommodations are top notch. The boat is very comfortable. Dive briefings are detailed, fun, and point out known "hangouts" of interesting critters. Travel to Little Cayman and Cayman Brac is weather-dependent and more possible during the summer months. Divemasters offer guided dives or allow divers to dive their own profiles for freedom extended to mature divers. Dive sites offer a variety of topography, including walls, reefs, wrecks, deep and shallow sites.

HONDURAS

Bay Islands Aggressor, December 2003, Jerry (jensen_jerry@hotmail.com) Eagle Point, OR. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, choppy. Big stable boat that is extremely well run and organized. The crew went out of their way to make this a vacation that we will never forget. The value for our diving dollar was excellent. Even though the weather was less than perfect, the captain went out of his way to find quiet and calm areas to dive at. We were able to dive the maximum of 5 dives per day and all at different spots. With poor weather, the land based operators were not going out while we moved around Roatan to find calm conditions. We were unable to dive at sites other than Roatan because of the weather, but the captain still tried even

motored a long ways out to another spot only to find that the currents were too strong. The food was excellent, I gained 7 pounds. They really must find a way to keep Jurgen as the cook. My wife and I were in the forward most cabin #1, further back in #6 the noise from the generator below in the engine room was deafening which went on 24/7. Another note about the crew, my Nitrox tank was refilled immediately upon coming up. Awesome compressors, maybe 2 minutes to fill a tank to 3000 psi plus. On our last dive, a baby humpback whale showed up above us for a couple minutes. At the end, my computer showed that my N2 and O2 were maxed out and I'm 51 years old. Regarding the flying arrangements. SOL air really screwed things up badly requiring an extra day going and 2 extra coming home. We were very happy with the *Bay Islands Aggressor*, a little rough around the edges but still a very good value. UW Photography Comments: dry camera table on dive deck with air hose to dry camera. Dive briefing asked us not to put drinks etc on camera table. (www.aggressor.com)

PUERTO RICO

Nekton Rorqual, December 2003, Richard Lehach, Larchmont, NY. Dives logged: 600+. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130'. First group of guests on this itinerary. Conditions of reefs and walls some of the best in the Caribbean. Crew very helpful and friendly. Windy and chop made getting back on board difficult for many divers. Not a good choice for new divers but worth the

effort if you are up to it. Nitrox available (book ahead limited to half the boat). Very well run considering we were the first guests diving the area with them (not all pins installed). (Steel 95 provided, great bottom times with nitrox) (www.nektoncruises.com)

Nekton Rorqual, February 2004, Edwin L. Granite, (egranite@aol.com) Chadds Ford, PA. Experience: 1,000+ dives, too many to count. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130' no decompression. Good: Crew, food, accommodations, service — great crew! Bad: No large stuff, very few sharks, no mantas, some stingrays, a few small turtles. This dive area is over-rated and was not as described by the Nekton Company. I have been on their Cay Sal itinerary, which was much better. One good issue: dived a site which had never before been dived (according to the crew) — wonderful underwater topography — boulders.

Nekton Rorqual, February 2004, Ernest M. Fidance (fangee@aol.com), Wilmington, DE. Vis: 45-80 feet. Water: 79-83 F. Dives logged: 800+. Crew, detailed pre-dive briefing, help with gear, food and accommodations better than average, camaraderie. Called "the Galapagos of the North" — nothing further from the truth! Minimal sea life — no big animals. Nothing that was advertised showed up, except label of "High Energy Diving" — sea conditions consistently rough. Also, ladders too short — everyone struggles getting back in boat.

Nekton Rorqual, March 2004, Chip Goodhart (snooz@aol.com) Harrisburg, PA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy, currents. Accommodations as always on a live-aboard, were tight, but not claustrophobic. Not as many large animals as we expected, but of course that can vary from trip to trip. Rorqual was steady considering the seas (4-6 feet) that we were in, but there definitely is rock and roll as in any other small (less than 100 feet length) vessel. As far as we know, there was only one passenger who got even queasy the whole time. Neither of us used any antiseasick medications or bands nor did we need them. The shining star of the whole voyage was the crew. There was not anything that was not provided. The Captain made it clear before we left the pier that if anything was wrong or needed, we should tell the crew so that they could address/correct it. This policy was the truth. Separate camera table with compressed air. Divemasters very helpful with cameras both in and out of water. Photo pros gave good advice when asked.

Nekton Rorqual, March 2004, John Wesolowski. My 21 yr. old son and I were on the *Nekton* during an anesthesia conference. Crew worked hard and seemed knowledgeable, skilled, helpful and friendly. Unlike your feature writer, I saw many sharks, turtles, lobsters, crabs, eels, octopus, and much more on every dive. There are 2 VCRs, a computer, 2 TVs, and 2 DVD players. Captain Nelson, the crew, and the *Rorqual* do a really nice job. Returning, we waited 3

hours at USAir because our flight was booked with almost all cruise passengers returning to the mainland, (and that equates into many elderly ladies each with 5 shopping bags as carry-ons that leave you with no overhead space.)

SABA/ST. EUSTATIUS/ST. KITTS

Caribbean Explorer II, September 2003, Vince Guinee, Reston, VA.

Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 81-85 F. Experience: Over 640 dives. Good value. Nice accommodations, professional, courteous, safety conscious crew. In-water guides seemed bored and did little in way of pointing out things to divers who wanted a guided dive. Main salon was not totally enclosed, which led to divers bolting for the safety of their cabins at night on two occasions when infestations of "storm flies" made conditions unbearable. Saba diving is excellent. Statia diving is limited by the number of sites that have moorings/buoys large enough to handle the *CEX* — with more buoys on the more interesting Statia sites, Statia could probably rival Saba. St. Kitts diving was acceptable. (www.explorerventures.com)

Caribbean Explorer II, June 2004, Mike Foust (drfoust@earthlink.net) Santa Ana, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, choppy, no currents. Should have been more aware this was a macro trip; also to accommodate the docking in Saba for this live-aboard they are installing a pier that will make the land tours easier. Unfortunately the dredg-

ing and after effects caused by this (and for months to come) turned what would have been 4 very good dives into dirt dives and nearly a waste of time. The crew was generally very good, and the bad press the captain has been getting, Ian from England, misrepresented my experience. There were many dives where there was an abundance of juvenile life, but you have to wonder where they go when they get bigger. The island tours were well liked by most on the boat. Diamond rock and man o war shoals were the best spots on this trip for sea life and visibility. UW Photography Comments: E6 processing was supposed to be available, but was out of commission. Other than that this was well accommodated.

Caribbean Explorer II, June 2004, Richard Foote (footemail@prodigy.net), Cleveland, OH. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 Fahrenheit, choppy. Fairly new boat is clean and comfortable. Crew seems to turn over frequently but tradition of service and helpfulness carry through. When we arrived after 11 PM due to delayed connections, the captain, hostess, and cook were waiting with a hot meal. There is a dive-master in the water every dive; Captain Ian dove one-on-one with my wife a few times to help her get comfortable. It is interesting to dive three separate islands, though it is more limited than shore-based operations as boat is restricted to larger buoys. Coral was in good shape and fish plentiful; saw sharks/turtles on 25% of dives. I saw several flying gurnards, which I'd never seen on other Caribbean dives. Saba

dives are especially dramatic, and conditions permitted Diamond Rock signature dive. Tradeoff for warm water was lower vis. due to algae blooms. Food was plentiful and tasty, though not gourmet (cook was an army cook for 20 years, 'nuff said). Best meal was fresh fish brought aboard by a fisherman. Shore tours in place of second afternoon dives were interesting, especially St. Kitts' Brimstone Hill Fortress, "Gibraltar of the West Indies" and Saba's one road. If you are making connections to St. Kitts via Liat or Winair, allow 2-3 hours in St. Martin. I'm glad we did St. Kitts to St. Martin itinerary as diving got more dramatic as the week progressed and St. Martin was an interesting location for Friday overnight.

Caribbean Explorer II, July 2004, Donald Hoft (hoft@TheExtraNet.com) Holliston, MA. Experience: 501- 1000 dives. Vis: 35 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 F, calm, choppy. I took this trip last year in November, St Kitts-to-St Maarten, but we ran into a tropical storm and spent 2 days at the dock in St M. This time we had much better weather and a totally new crew. Our group of 9 divers were all experienced and enjoyed each others company — as we did with the crew. IAN, the skipper is a fun guy with broad experience. *Undercurrent* had a good feature of this itinerary which I think does well in describing the details (March 2004). The diving got better and more challenging as we went North (St K-to-Saba). St K (2 days) was good, and interesting with many wrecks (in south) and reefs (north). Viz was not great, generally 35 - 75 ft. Statia (1 day) was

good but the sites were repetitious. Healthy reef, nice color made for fun diving in this Marine Park (always with a marine park ranger who joined in with the group). Saba (2.5 days) was the best, again in a Marine Park. Pinnacles, Man-of-War and Diamond Rocks being the most dramatic but with nice sites all over. Other good sites we never got to dive due to time limitations. Friday we did a 6 am and 9 am dive before heading to St. Maarten (when I did this 6 am dive in Nov. it was a night dive, this was in light). The island tours were well received (I only did Saba and enjoyed it), and it's a good comfortable boat. I was the only "east coaster" in the group-all the others were "westerners" who had the long travel to the Caribbean.

Caribbean Explorer II, July 2004, Roger and Pam Smith (rps8@earthlink.net), Birmingham, AL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 Fahrenheit, calm, surge. Built in 1978, but it's clean and in good condition. Our cabin, #6, had an extremely small shower with plenty of hot water, separate from the toilet and sink. There are no individual controls for the air in the cabins. Most people thought the cabins were a little cold, but they offered plenty of blankets! The dive deck is roomy with a large camera table and several rinse tanks. There is a warm shower on the dive deck but we were asked to not use soap because the deck gets slippery. The crew always had smiles and didn't mind requests. They were excited about diving. The food was good and plentiful. Nothing spicy or fancy. Great snacks in

the morning and afternoon. We boarded the boat in St. Maarten, dove Saba, Statia and St. Kitts before disembarking at St. Kitts. We spent 3 days diving Saba. Eye of the Needle and Diamond Rock were spectacular. There was some current/surge on most dives, especially at the surface to 30 feet. It usually wasn't too strong, but a few times we were flying like kites on the mooring line. Expect to swim against a little current on most dives. This would be a good place for drift diving, but they are not set up for it. On most dives we saw turtles, Pederson Shrimp, Arrow Crabs, Nurse Sharks, Lettuce Sea Slugs, Queen Triggerfish and eels. On a few dives we saw Caribbean Reef Sharks, octopi, and Flying Gurnards.

Caribbean Explorer II, August 2004, Ron & Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA. Vis: 60-100 feet. Water: 83-85 F. Dives logged: 274. After reading your March 2004 article, we booked a trip aboard the *Caribbean Explorer II*. What a great trip! The crew was great, the food was excellent, and we also had a really good group of divers. With a small group of only nine, we made some good friends. Woke up on Sunday to an amazing view of Saba, calm seas and sun-filled skies. The diving was excellent – saw lots of tropicals and turtles – 4 - 5 dives a day can't be beat!

TOBAGO

Wind Dancer, November 2003, Richard Lehach, Larchmont, NY. Dives logged: 600+. Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130'. Good Caribbean div-

ing. New Peter Hughes itinerary and still needs to work out best sites to dive. Largest brain corals (fields) in the world. 25% of the times tanks not properly filled (<2500 psi alum. 80). Best diving conditions were told are spring and fall. Impacted by large Venezuela river runoff. Reef in good condition but not a large fish area probably due to fishing. (www.peterhughes.com)

Wind Dancer, June 2004, Terry Gee, El Paso, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, surge, currents. Peter Hughes really out did themselves for my group on this trip. Due to some scheduling problems a trip to Grenada had to be changed three months from departure time. Diana, Christi and Jeff of Peter Hughes came through for us and saved the day. We all loved the *Wind Dancer*. A great crew, excellent food, a beautiful island and wonderful friendly people on the island. Unfortunately the weather acted up a bit and prevented us from diving some of the better sites and knocked the visibility down a bunch from what we are used to. But over all it was good diving. I think that it is for advanced, experienced divers that have a number of drift dives under their belts. Due to drift diving it was difficult to spend too much time trying to set up a shot. Close up and macro were good, distance, due to visibility, was poor. Large table aboard the boat for cameras and such equipment but no dedicated wash tubs. Crew was very accommodating when passing cameras in and out of the boat.

TURKS AND CAICOS

Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, November 2003, Roger and Pam Smith (rps8@earthlink.net), Birmingham, AL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 90 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 Fahrenheit, choppy. New in March 2003, it's one of the nicest live-aboards around. Captain Peirs, the owner, has great pride in his ship and works to keep his guests happy. Most crew members were accommodating and friendly. Beetle made a fantastic guide. The cabins were on the first floor, salon and dive deck on the second floor, and sun deck and bar on the top. The common areas are roomy and comfortable. The hot tub worked! The dive deck is spacious with the usual lockers under your seat and a large camera table. Dive briefings were detailed. Due to the wind and air temperature, we were always cold when exiting a dive. The solution was to change into dry clothes and wear sweatshirts between every dive. We joked about making 20 minute safety stops because we knew we were going to freeze when we surfaced. Most dives were walls with 40' tops, which became repetitive by the end of the week, although they were good dive sites. Saw plenty of turtles, large grouper, queen triggers, eels, Pederson shrimp, stingrays, etc, only one eagle ray for the week but we missed it. Reef sharks on most dives, sometimes pretty close up. (www.aggressor.com)

Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, December 2003, Bob and Leone Woods (bobwoods@pacbell.net)