

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](http://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](http://www.aggressor.com))

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

**Hillsborough, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, no currents. My wife and I spent 7 days on the live-aboard *Turks and Caicos Aggressor II* from December 20 to 27, 2003. We reported aboard Saturday afternoon 12/20; the boat was supposed to get underway Sunday morning, but because of a bad storm coming through we didn't get underway until Monday, and did our first dive west of Provo late Monday morning. We lost a day and a half of diving, but the owner-captain (Piers van der Walt) was absolutely right to delay getting underway, and the passage around the northwest part of the island was rough enough that some people were too sick to dive Monday anyway. Chalk one up for Caribbean winter weather. The diving was typical TandC — good vis, reef tops at about 40 to 60 feet with walls dropping away sharply, and nice 80 to 83 degree water. Good healthy coral, both hard and soft, and plenty of sponges. As always we saw plenty of sharks, a goodly number of turtles, and the usually cast of reef fish (filefish, queen triggers, various kinds of angels, friendly stingrays, moray and garden eels, a spotted drum and a scorpionfish). Spent some fun time watching a pair of jawfish work up their nerve to come out of their holes to check us out, only to dash back in again, over and over. Surprisingly, we only saw a couple of eagle rays, for which this area is famous. Others reported seeing more, though. The *Aggressor II* is a brand new boat, launched in March of '03, and is very comfortable and well appointed. It follows the standard *Aggressor* (mono-hull) formula in terms of living quarters

below, salon and dive area on the main deck, and sun deck, hot tub, and bar on the upper level. Very well set up for diving and camera work, with diving from the platform aft of the dive deck. Unaccountably, there is no drinking water available on the main deck level (without going into the galley, which we usually avoid); you have to either go up to the bar or to your own cabin to get a glass of water. Overall, though, it is a very nice boat to be aboard. The service suffered from a lack of attention to detail. Menus, which were to be posted daily, never made it up until after lunch, and then only until Wednesday; Wednesday's menu was still up when we left the boat the following Saturday. Yogurt was to be available as a standard breakfast choice, but there were only a few aboard, and they were gone by Tuesday. Food was borderline; we had the feeling the chef was just a crew member whose turn it was to cook. There was rarely any fruit available for snacks, and the vegetables served with most meals were canned or frozen. We've always been spoiled in the past with a real turkey dinner on live-aboards at Christmas or Thanksgiving, but this time we had one of those frozen rolled turkey breast logs you get at Safeway. The final blow came at departure time. Per standard *Aggressor* formula, you are on your own for dinner Friday night. When we returned from dinner for our last night on the boat, since no shoes are allowed aboard, we deposited ours as instructed in the basket by the gangway. But the basket was left out on the dock, it rained overnight, and we found Saturday morning that we would be making the trip home in wet shoes. The

captain's attitude was "Oh, gee, too bad" — but he didn't have to wear wet shoes for the next 15 hours or so as those of us returning to California did. Wet shoes in planes and airports make for a miserable way to end a trip.

***Turks and Caicos Aggressor, February 2004, Rick Cavanaugh (rickcavanaugh@comcast.net) Ellicott City, MD.*** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, calm, no currents. My first live-aboard. The boat recently had a complete overhaul so it was beautiful, but AC was too cold. The food was excellent, but it is standard American fare. No local food. The chef did an excellent job. The divemasters seemed to be more interested in doing their underwater video that they sell at the end of the trip and their underwater photo album than trying to point out interesting critters. I did 5 dives per day. 2 morning dives at the same location, boat moved during lunch, 2 more afternoon dives at a new location. And a night dive after dinner at the afternoon location. The dive sites at West Caicos were in pretty rough shape. On some sites the majority of the coral was dead and or diseased. One or two sites there were so so. The dive site the Anchor was decent. French Cay was more impressive. Coral was in good shape, healthy reef, excellent growth. When the reef is healthy there are lots of fish to go with it. Quite nice. If all of the dives were done at French Cay I would have been much more impressed with the trip. They only make it to French Cay in good weather. The amphitheater on Provo was good with lots of macro

activity on the cage. There was a lack of moorings for the dive ships at French Cay. The *Aggressor* dropped its anchor more than one time into coral and large sponges. There was significant damage to the area where the anchor and chain dragged over night. The area cannot sustain this type of damage. They filled non Nitrox tanks with Nitrox. I tried to calibrate the O2 meter on a friend's tank. He was a new diver and not Nitrox certified. The reading was way off on my Nitrox filled tank. I repeated the calibration on another tank and got the correct reading on my tank. I then went to recheck my friend's tank. Yup, it was full of Nitrox! I notified the divemasters, who then drained and refilled the tank. It did not seem to bother them that this happened. I told my story to someone else on the boat after the trip and the same thing happened to them. I have made many deep dives on air and it has never occurred to me to test the air before the dive but I think we may have hit the point where air and Nitrox divers need to both test their tanks. The sewage treatment plant on the boat would pump overboard on a pretty random basis. Not real pleasant when you are about to surface and 20 gallons of brown liquid pours out the back. Great camera table and help available from boat photographer and captain.

***Turks and Caicos Aggressor, August 2004, Helen Malnar (helenpm1@tampabay.rr.com), Tampa, FL.*** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 Fahrenheit, calm. Superior boat with lots of room made this trip wonderful. The deck space and lounge areas both indoors

and out were the best I've seen on a live-aboard. While the cabins were on the small side, it didn't seem to matter because there was just so much space everywhere else. I slept most nights on the top deck, under the stars with the ocean breezes. The lounge chairs are comfortable and plentiful. The hot tub and upstairs bar was where my group of four spent most evenings, even though they had just about every movie available on DVD to watch. The diving is all wall diving and we encountered many sharks and large grouper. Jacks and barracuda accompanied us with the occasional turtle, eagle ray and even a manta. This diving was the easiest ever, always coming up right at the boats ladder. The walls are easy to navigate so they don't require you to go with their guides, although you had that option. Captain Piers was one of the most gracious captains, always visible and pitching in wherever he was needed. The whole crew did an outstanding job and the food was tasty and plentiful. We had to dodge Hurricane Charlie to get out of Florida so had to leave a day early. We stayed at the Turtle Cove in and ate at some of the local restaurants. They were pricey but very good food. Best burger ever at Shark Bites!

**Turks & Caicos Explorer, August 2004, Mary and Tim Thomas, Saint Cloud, MN.** Vis: 100-150 feet. Water: 82-85 F. Dives logged: 1,000+. Great diving — 2 weeks on boat — dive 5 times a day, every day. Lots to see — West Caicos, French Cay, Sand Spit rarely dived. Fish and turtles actually come to check out the divers! Captain and crew did everything they could to

put us in the best water. A wonderful operation — we had a great time!  
([www.caribexplorer.com](http://www.caribexplorer.com))

## UNITED STATES

### Texas

***MV Spree/MV Fling, Gulf Diving, August 2004, Mark Parker*** ([markparker@ix.netcom.com](mailto:markparker@ix.netcom.com)) **Houston, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Great crew, DM's, food. Diving is deep and if you want lots of dives watch your computer for deco limits (definitely need computers here and for Nitrox your MOD) though some of the reef is 60ft.—mid ship exit 10ft. above water line — must catch down/side line to get to the mooring line to make your decent. Tough if the line is under the boat and lots of current. Down lines for deep stops and safety stop. A free fall is OK, but not over the walls. The Flower Gardens and Stetson Bank are awesome. Whale shark, mantas, bull shark, hammerhead, nurse sharks, silkies and the big spotted drums. Captain Ken even let us do Rig 389 — truly an underwater paradise of blennies, and juveniles of all the reef fish. What made the trip even more special was the coral spawning. Absolutely incredible. Carry your own multi-outlet for battery power — otherwise good set up. ([www.gulf-diving.com](http://www.gulf-diving.com))

***M/V Spree, Gulf Diving, Texas, September 2004, Paul Schmieder, Bellville, TX.*** Vis: 40-60 feet. Water: 83-87 F. Dives logged: 117. The *M/V Spree*, twin to the *M/V Fling*, is an older

vessel, but well maintained. The captain and crew run allowed seven dives including an optional night dive. Ours was a Wednesday to Friday trip, so that we had to be at the dock in Freeport, TX by 8 p.m. Wednesday; lengthy boat briefing from about 9:30 to 10:30 p.m. and we finally got underway. Cruised all night to the East Bank of the gardens, which is 110 miles offshore, and arrived by 5:30 a.m. next morning. Wake-up calls come early at 6 a.m. for the 7 a.m. dives. Because the East and West Banks are deeper dives, long intervals between dives were strictly enforced. During the afternoon interval we cruised to the West Bank and finished there with our night dive. Another overnight cruise to Stetson Bank for 2 dives Friday morning. Saw my first manta, which soared up from the depths and circled around the Stetson pinnacles. Food on the Spree was good, not great, Texan cuisine was embellished by fresh shrimp our captain acquired in a trade for what must have been emergency beer for a lonely shrimp trawler.

## VIRGIN ISLANDS - BRITISH

**Bareboat Charter, May 2004, Dee Mickey** ([automotivecareer@mindspring.com](mailto:automotivecareer@mindspring.com)) **Madison, AL.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, choppy. While we rented tanks and weights from Chris Sawyer, we were on our own for all but a couple dives. You are captain, divemaster, crew and diver. Complete freedom and total responsibility. (Options: One can charter with a captain and crew. Dive operations will meet your bareboat and take you to diving.) Power and sailing yachts are avail-

able from marinas on St. Thomas and Tortola. The Sir Francis Drake Channel is about 35 miles long, mostly protected from open seas, and one is always within sight of land. We spent most of our time in the BVI's. We rent 2 tanks each, and plan the itinerary around air fill locations, dive sites and water fill stations for the boat and winds. For refills, that means either docking & hauling tanks or putting all the tanks in the dinghy to take them ashore. A few dive books that give you site maps. The dive shops are great about sharing site info. In the BVI's there is a great dive site mooring system. In the USVI, it's not as reliable. Almost all dive sites are 40-60 feet deep, with little current. The wind and seas determine the calmer sites. If you want calm water, just go to the lee. This spring was record rainfall and a record low temp of 70 degrees; the viz was lower due to runoff. The reefs are healthy, lots of fish in most places, and there are few divers. We leave our mooring at 7 a.m. and head to a dive site ahead of the commercial boats. We're on the next site about 11. Then we head to the overnight mooring and dive shop for refills. Lots of great snorkel sites. Other than the Baths, the Rhone and the Caves, a site is crowded if there are two other boats. Many sites have only one mooring, so unless someone anchors, which we strongly discourage for the sake of the reef, it's all yours. Squid almost everywhere. Rays were abundant, including what must have been a 10 foot ray in the sand at The Baths. Dived Eagle Shoal, an open water site that is often too rough. The schools of fish were incredible, the topography site truly awesome. Another