

Salt Cay Divers, Tradewinds, May 2004, Pam Rudy, San Jose, CA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, choppy. Not as many fish as I've seen on other dive trips — that was disappointing. Water was cooler than I expected. Must bring own food or order it in advance from the dive shop to avoid expensive eating out. No groceries on island. Dive operation very accommodating to our group of 10. The divemaster, John, had only been there three weeks, so he was still learning the dive sites; after some prompting, Ollie, an owner, started pointing out some stuff on the reef. The crew switched over our tanks, took our weights and BC's as we exited the water. They also put our BC's with tanks and weights on us, as we sat on the stern of the boat with our masks and fins on — ready to dive. Included in dive package is a day trip to Grand Turk, 9 miles away, with two dives there. Great restaurant at Island Thyme. Always a fairly strong breeze, which was quite comfortable — never too hot or too cold. \$.50 a pound charged by Interisland Airways for over 40 lbs of luggage from Provo to Salt Cay.

Salt Cay Divers, Tradewinds, June 2004, Cathy Bolton (cathyfb@aol.com)

Linwood, PA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, choppy. There were 3 of us and we all dove Provo & Grand Turk before and loved it. Since this island is more isolated we thought the diving would be better. We signed up for a meal plan since food is scarce on the island, but the restaurant we had our plan with was closed for a month. We were switched

to another place where a woman cooked but you had to tell her what you wanted ahead of time but everyone had to eat the same thing. No beverage was included nor any dessert. Water was \$2 extra. If you didn't eat all your meal you got less the next time. The woman was a good cook but variety was lacking. After 5 nights of fish and rice and beans, I was longing for McDonald's. Maid service was once in the week. The toilet couldn't be flushed too much during low tide. There were 3 women in the room so this was ugly. Two huge roaches in the room caused a bit of panic too. We were told phones weren't a problem only to find out that you had to have a T&C phone card that was sold on Provo, not on Salt Cay. If you used the dive shop phone, the owner charged you \$3 a min, to dial the 1-800 number on the phone card. We found a phone booth a mile from the hotel where there was no surcharge. One of the woman had a sickly mother and this was a real problem. The diving was fair except for the wreck of the Endymion which was great. We lucked out and had one day when the weather allowed us to hit this wreck. It was advertised as part of the trip but later we were told this 1 tank dive counted as 2 dives. The divemasters were very good and let you go at your own pace, limiting down time to 75 mins. Diving for 4-6 people was done in a small skiff. We only got one night dive in. Without lights it was hairy getting back to the beach. There is a package advertising unlimited night diving but this would be taking a tank and going off the beach by the dive shop. No one is around so you would be on your own. The beach in front of

our hotel was rocky and not a good entry. An e-mail to Debbie was all that was needed for supplies. Buying a ticket for the InterIsland flight was a problem if you don't have access to an international fax from 4-6PM. Water is very scarce so camera equipment was dumped in a small bucket. Two guys had big cameras and strobes so small cameras were out of luck.

UNITED STATES**Alabama****Down Under Dive Shop, Young's By The Sea, August 2004, Clem Clapp (cclapp@bellsouth.net), Maplesville, AL.**

Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 Fahrenheit, calm, no Currents. Great boat. 46' Newton. All shop and boat personnel were good in boat and under water. Dive briefing was extensive and diving heavily structured. One dm told me that they dealt with many once a year divers and students. After a short discussion, they allowed my daughter and me a bit more freedom. Lot of silt, etc in water lending to poor viz. Pretty routine for the area. Jellyfish infestation was moderate. Glad I wore my skins. Saw a number of octopus, toadfish, jacks, blue angels and assorted other tropicals and a large 30" loggerhead rubbing himself on the prop shaft of the Naval Tug. Highlight was a 12' manta that hung with us for 10 minutes or so. Dedicated table and rinse bucket for cameras. Staff reminded all divers to refrain from other use. (www.downunderdiveshop.com)

Florida**Big Pine Key****Strike Zone Charters Inc., Casa Grande Bed & Breakfast, January 2004, Gill Cruz, Pleasanton, CA.**

Dives logged: 2500+. Vis: 30-40 ft. Water: 72-74 F. Dive restrictions enforced: one hour/500 psi left. I wish I understood how restricted the dive operation was and that they included snorkelers. Unless you are a group of divers at your level, the advanced divers would be bored. Cattle boat experience. We dived Looe Key Reef Marine Reserve that has abundant marine life (barracuda, grouper, lobster, conch, reef fish). The dive organization is well run. You need to schedule wreck and wall dives to get what you want because they cater to the tourist who is passing through. (www.strikezonecharter.com)

Underseas Inc, April 2004, G.

Fulkerson, Amelia, OH. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 45 Feet. Water: 70-72 to 72 Fahrenheit, choppy. Where would you take 40 teenagers who live in Ohio to get certified for 700 bucks including transportation? In winter, Looe Key is an ideal shallow accessible spot with ample camping and hotels to support such an operation. Underseas was clearly taxed by this many novices - but they took it with good humor (for the most part, better than some of us chaperones) Classes were held at our KOA camp ground in Sugarloaf Key and boats left from Big Pine. Visibility was pretty poor due to recent heavy winds. We barely hit a window of three days of

decent winds so the boats could go out. Looe Key is pretty tired looking compared to 20 years ago — they ought to consider closing parts of it in some rotation to let corals recover. Typical Keys schools of fish, a few turtles, one friendly Goliath Grouper and several shark sightings in the 4 to 7 foot range. All 40 students successfully trained and returned home safe. Hats off to the teachers who led this adventure for the kids. If you wanted to take a big group from school, scout troop or church to learn to dive - here is a spot. But know the weather is better for camping in winter, but better for diving in summer. (www.underseas.org)

Boynton Beach

DCI, Marriott Ocean Point, August 2004, Steven Blair (SMBlair@pacbell.net), Danville, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 86F, calm. Marriott Ocean Point was comfortable. We called 15-20 dive operators, including down to north Miami, and they all seem to be hooked on this shallow 60-40 reef dive theme. I am assuming it is to have a short surface interval so they can get them back in and go home. We were interested in the 100-130 range for better visibility and s wrecks. Dive Charter International in Boynton Beach and captain Leo was happy to drop us off on a deep wreck and we tied off our float, while others were dropped off for a nearby drift-reef dive. When we finished our dive we merely drifted with the current as we made our slow ascent, and the Deeper was there to pick us up. Leo runs the Deeper and

Little Deeper, and his was the best and most thorough dive operation we found during two weeks. What made it even more enjoyable is the boats are spotless when you board, divemaster's were there if needed, and fresh snacks and soda's were on board. (www.deeper-dci.com)

Key Largo

Abyss Dive Center, Marriott May 2004, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net), Elmhurst, IL.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 35 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy, surge. This was my 3rd time with Abyss and these folks do not disappoint. It is a fine operation with a single 6-diver boat. The staff and boat captains are friendly and experienced. Conditions were not ideal but we made the best of it. The Marriott is a satisfactory selection but those staying in Marathon can take advantage of a package offered by Abyss and the Holiday Inn located just next to Abyss. Some of Abyss' facilities are showing their age but Bill & Heidi are just wonderful to do business with. The Florida Keys remains a very viable choice, especially for those looking to log a good deal of bottom time on reefs & wrecks while staying in the USA. (www.abyssdive.com)

Amoray Divers, Amy Slate's Amoray Inn, January 2004, Dean K. Knudson, (deanknudson@yahoo.com) Golden Valley, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 75 Feet. Water: 69 to 73 F, choppy. This is a well designed and very pleasant appearing resort. The

rooms are large and clean, the small kitchen units work well, and most of the rooms are far enough off of the main road to offer privacy and low noise levels. The resort is supposed to look like a large spread out Caribbean villa. Most of the rooms are within a 45 second stroll to a locked equipment cage that guests can store gear within. Maid service is unobtrusive and complete. Within 30 steps of the equipment room is the large catamaran dive boat. There is a spit of land that extends out into the bay with a couple of tiki style thatched huts, and it's a pleasant place to have a beer and watch the sky and the occasional dolphin swimming by. The web site suggests that there is a hot tub or spa on the property, and that's not true, it was removed due to some zoning or safety issue. That's really too bad, this place could really use a spa. It's too cold in the winter months to regularly use the pool. It's possible to get excellent deals on rooms in the winter, but buying a diving/room package in advance is a gamble. Winter diving in the Keys is very hit and miss, a northern cold front can wipe out the diving for days in a row. Water temps in mid winter in the keys are chilly. When the resorts are advertising 74 to 78 degree water temps, one can expect the actual temp to be 2 to 3 degrees lower. I was cold the first day, but was toasty warm the following three days as a result of renting a very large full sleeve upper half suit which I rented (\$6 per day), and wore over my 5/4/3 full suit. I also used a beanie. I recorded a bottom temp of 69 F one diving day. Plan to bring a windbreaker or polarguard sweater for the trip out

and back. The boat is a catamaran style cattleboat which is spacious and 25% full on weekdays and packed to the gills on weekends. There are five exit points, so all 20 to 25 divers on the packed boat get off and on within a reasonable period of time. This is, by and large, a beginner's boat, with the usual newbie chaos and admirable enthusiasm. I was surpassed when one certified diver confessed that she didn't know that she needed a watch or time-piece to scuba dive, and hadn't brought one on the boat. I felt sorry for her, and loaned her my spare. No good deed goes unpunished, she returned it with a scratched crystal, but I didn't have the heart to point this out to her, as she was gushing with excitement about diving "out in the real ocean." I picked this boat and resort as a means to entice a friend who hadn't dived in 15 years to join me. It worked well. Most of the dive sites are 30 feet or less in depth, and the marine park status of the keys has led to a large quantity of fish, eels, small rays and lobster in the area. All in all, not an unpleasant diving experience, but, let's face it, Cozumel it ain't. The catamaran won't go out if there are large waves, and divers are directed to other boats in the neighborhood. One of the boat captains was a very pleasant man and an excellent host. Another was irritable and short tempered, and actually got into an argument with one of the dive shop staff right on the dock, in front of assembling customers. I had no major complaints about the staff overall. This resort would be an ideal location to introduce a non-diving husband/wife or partner to the sport, more so if that

individual were uncomfortable with foreign travel. There is a breakfast offered, included in the price, but it is simply cereal, milk, toast, coffee and inexpensive juice near the dive boat. Fine, but nothing special. Hobo's restaurant, next door to the hotel, is the locals' hangout, and serves a fine lunch and dinner, cheaply. On Friday and Saturday nights the "world famous tiki bar" 20 minutes down the road has live music in a big open air covered bar, and is worth the drive. There are dozens of restaurants up and down the road, the captain and staff can steer you to what you might be looking for. There is a Publix supermarket a three minute drive up the road, and a large discount dive equipment shop five minutes down the road. Shell World, also five minutes down the road, is one of the best tourist traps in the Southern United States, and is chock full of all of the useless tidbits that grade school kids love, including shells, pirate flags and nautical toys. I scored a Hawaiian hula girl fringed lamp there that I am certain my wife will let me take out of the garage and into the downstairs bar within five years if I keep begging. (www.amoray.com)

Amoray Divers, Amy Slate's Dive Resort, February 2004, Curt & Kathy Hofer (curthofer@earthlink.net), Novi, MI. Experience: 26-50 dives Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 70 to 74 Fahrenheit, choppy, no Currents. Winds stirred up a good chop and contributed to low visibility the first day and a half of diving. Calmer winds and more sun the last day brought better visibility and somewhat warmer water.

Soft coral, was abundant and in good conditions. Smaller species included a wrasse blenny, yellowtail damselfish and yellowhead jawfish. Lots French, gray, and queen angelfish, blue tangs and doctorfish, butterflies, grunts, snapper, porkfish, hogfish, scrawled filefish, spotted drum, balloon fish, smooth trunkfish, Atlantic spade fish, southern sting rays, green & spotted morays, black grouper, and nurse sharks. Lobsters were plentiful. The large catamaran helped during the rougher weather and allowed plenty of room. The boat will accommodate 30 plus divers, snorkelers and crew – about 50 people. We typically had about 15 divers and half as many snorkelers. Defog spray and mask rinse buckets are provided as is a dedicated camera rinse tub. The boat has a head. An ice chest is available for storing cold drinks, sandwiches, that passengers choose to bring. Alcoholic beverages are allowed but once you imbibe you are done in the water for the day. A boat safety briefing is given each day. Diving is unescorted but briefings are thorough including the best path to travel and likely creature sightings. Dive restrictions are one hour or 500 pounds remaining, whichever comes first. Tanks are Aluminum 80's with 3000 plus psi per fill. Return is via either of two ladders on opposite sides of the boat. Both entry and return are supervised by the crew so no one is likely to slip or become distressed. Crew was knowledgeable, friendly, helpful, and courteous. Pete (DM) led the certification dives for our son. He was an outstanding instructor — thorough and encouraging. The resort was

reasonably priced. The office staff was friendly and efficient. Lots of good gear for purchase or rent, though they don't rent hoods. Our room was appointed well enough, clean and in good repair. However, there was an overbearing scent of something resembling lipstick that assaulted us when we entered the room. The bed was uncomfortable, worn out and had a pronounced slant from both edges to the middle. The floors were all tiled, but with no throw rugs, which lent a cold feel The boat was a 45 second walk from our room. The resort also provides a large fresh water rinse tank and an adjacent gear storage locker, kept locked between dives. There are some reasonably good restaurants near the resort. Hobo's is casual and has good food. The Sundowner brags one of the best sunsets in the area, has a nice outdoor dining area and does a good job of providing typical Keys fare. They have live entertainment. Their coffee could stand improvement.

Amoray Divers, Amy Slate's Amoray Inn, August 2004, Jack Gullo Jr. (jgullo@carr.org), New Windsor, MD. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 Fahrenheit, choppy. Nice Catamaran style dive boat; lots of people on board. Lots of boats on reef. Good operation. Convenient parking.

Aquanuts, Kelly's On The Bay, January 2004, Leslie and Michael Bardelli (lbardelli@snet.net), New Milford, CT. Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 70 to 72 Fahrenheit, choppy. Kelly's in Key

Largo is no frills motel. The rooms are small but functional. Each has a small fridge, coffee pot and microwave; some have kitchens, a few have porches and a couple overlook the bay. They offer a continental breakfast. There are 2 grocery stores close by and plenty of great restaurants. Clean, comfortable rooms. Aquanuts is a well run, safety conscious organization. They use the DAN tag system to track of the divers. You set up your gear on the dock and they load your BC and tank on the boat while you wait on the shore. You bring the rest of your gear on board during roll call. They do a verbal roll call between the 2 dives and the final roll call involves returning the DAN Tag. They have 2 boats that are large and open with a rinse tank for cameras. There is a dry storage area up front, but it does not stay dry in the rain. Marine head as well as fresh water showers. Platform on the back for entries and 2 ladders to get back on board. The boats also have fresh water and a cooler that you put drinks or snack in. They do a general briefing about the boat during your ride out and then a site briefing on arrival. The Captain and dm stay on board. They do The Duane and Spiegel Grove each once a week. You must be advanced certified, have a dive computer and go no deeper than 100 Ft on the wrecks. The rest of the diving is shallow reefs, 30-40 Ft. The boats generally leave for 2 tank boat dives 8 AM and 1 PM. The morning dives seem to be more popular. Beware, there is a minimum number of divers and we did see the afternoon dive get cancelled because of not enough divers. The boat ride is general-

ly 45 minutes. Surface interval is usually short even after a deep dive. You can do both AM and PM dives. The boats are back in time and they bring a cell phone and a menu of Hobo's Restaurant so just grab your meal and pay at the restaurant. We enjoyed the diving as well as the staff. Everyone was helpful. Each boat has a rinse tank for cameras only. Otherwise nothing special for photographers. Boats open, no real dry place for battery or film changes. (www.aqua-nuts.com)

Divers City, Rock Reef Resort, May 2004, Martin Klein, Hoboken, NJ.

Experience: 200 dives. Vis: 30-60 ft. Water: 77 F, choppy. Divers City was top notch. This is not a cattle boat operation and Barbara (the owner) and Kip (the Captain) cater to your wishes. You can dive standard aluminum tanks or 85cf steels which take some weight off your belt. Yoke or DIN are available. The shop will store your gear overnight. The boat is in great shape and comfortable with well maintained safety equipment. Kip, was knowledgeable and gave good briefings. The weather was rough with 5-7 ft swells on some days and somewhat impaired vis compared to calm conditions. Kip would still take us to the wrecks we wanted to dive. We did cancel the plan to dive the Spiegel because of the big swells. Usual prolific fish life that the Keys offer. Huge Goliath groupers on the Eagle. The dive on the Duane was superb with barracuda too numerous to count, a bull shark and a large school of Permit enveloping the wheelhouse. Rock Reef Resort in Key Largo is a good deal with spacious rooms and

pleasant grounds facing the water. (www.diverscityusa.com)

Divers Den and The Splash, July 2004, Patrick Coyne, Bellaire, TX.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 76 to 84 F, calm. Our group of six divers included three with fewer than 15 dives each. Two days of 2-tank dives. The artificial reefs were at reasonable depths for less experienced divers. Seas ranged from flat to less than 18" so the first boat diving experiences for the rookies were as pleasurable as possible. We had to report to the shop one hour before departure to pick up our tanks and rental gear. We were amazed to find out that it was our responsibility to transport tanks to the marina, 3 miles. At the marina a deck hand did assist in our unloading of the tanks and gear and transporting them to the boat, 50-75 yards. The deck hand did place the tanks and gear on the boat and did little else in assisting. Diver's Den brokers divers to "The Splash." That boat is adequate in size and was not overcrowded. Amenities are limited to cold water and a seating area that has a reasonable amount of covered deck space. The dive and safety briefings were minimal but adequate. On the second day one of our divers used the marine head. Capt. Casey announced that the head had been out of service "for two weeks" and that parts had been ordered. The crew did assist in securing fins to feet before entry. No shop supplied divemaster or crew member entered the water with us. Upon our exiting the water the crew did take fins from the divers and immediately disap-

peared. The crew seemed to be nowhere near the ladder as divers exited the water. On the first day the Capt. announced that he always insisted on a minimum surface interval of one hour between dives. However, on the second day he stated that he "had a date" and made a serious effort to bully us into the water after the last surfacing diver had been up for only 35 minutes. When the Capt noticed that he had been ignored he stated that "I don't have much of a life, but I 'got a life and I do want to get home.'" On the first dive that had a possible maximum depth of 80-85,' I did not let our group drop below 60' so the 55 minute surface interval that I managed to take kept us out of the shaded areas of the PADI dive tables...but not by much. When we returned to the pier we were not asked but were directed to "form a conga line" and to remove the empty tanks from the boat. We were reminded that it was our responsibility to return them to the shop. Attitudes of the dive shop personnel ranged from incredibly helpful to borderline combative.

HMS Minnow, Holiday Inn Key Largo Resort, February 2004, Steven Altchuler (zdq1dm001@sneakemail.com) Rochester, MN.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 73 F, calm, choppy. The HMS Minnow 25' boat holds up to six divers. Jeff tailors the dives to your preferences. I was diving with my younger daughter (Jr Open Water), so we dove shallow reefs and the Benwood, a shallow wreck. Jeff planned great dives, increasing in difficulty. There's no divemaster in the

water with you, but Jeff gives excellent briefings, with charts, to help you plan the dive. Jeff leaves the marina earlier than other boats to get to the dive sites you want. The boat is comfortable. He carries first aid supplies, as well as oxygen, marine radio, and cellular telephone. With a quick email, he had Nitrox waiting for me for the dive. Jeff does not intrude, but clearly observes the divers and assesses their skills. He had a rinse tank waiting on the pier. The Minnow has no head. His email is hmsminnow@msn.com. Jeff and I easily arranged our trip via e-mail. Key Largo Holiday Inn: Conveniently located to the HMS Minnow. Check-in was simple and accurate. At dinner, our three entrees at the hotel restaurant came at three different times. The room had a sleeper sofa in it. It was made, with the sheets covering the packing plastic which the mattress was left in. We were locked into our room. When we went to get ice at bedtime, the door would not open. It took over one-half hour before they could unlock it from outside, and then another one-half hour before it was fixed enough that the door could be open and shut from inside the room. However, no one at night could reprogram the lock and they did not call in anyone who could reprogram the lock. As a result, one of us needed to stay in the room at all times until the next morning. This meant we could not have breakfast together. (If we hadn't tried to get the ice, we would have discovered all this as we tried to leave for our dive the next morning.) At checkout, I was billed for a meal that someone else had. It took them ten minutes to verify

the charge was not mine.
(www.hmsminnow.com)

HMS Minnow, Holiday Inn, July 2004, Paula Scheidt & Scott Bundy, Metairie, LA. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 95 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. What a great operation. Captain/Owner Jeff Jarvis and his wife Betty made us feel very comfortable. The HMS Minnow is a great boat and easy to dive from. Jeff asks where you want to go or what you want to see. He will give you input on dive sites and let you pick. We did 12 dives in 5 days (parents did 18) and my only regret is that we didn't book more time on his boat as he was full the whole week and we couldn't add any dives! It seemed that most other divers on boat we repeats diving with Jeff.

HMS Minnow, Holiday Inn Key Largo, July 2004, Gary & Marie Scheidt, Hartford City, IN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 90 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. Excellent 6 pack operation. Easy back roll in, ladder you can use with fins on. Captain/Owner Jeff was a pleasure to dive with. Six divers max. Easy to get into BC's and in/out of water. Jeff takes BC and puts in rack when you come out of water, and helps set up, and switch gear. Good briefings, maps, choice of spots to dive. Leaves in morning by 8AM, most times first boat to site. Afternoon dive leaves by 1 PM. Diving good for inexperienced as well as experienced. Did not dive any deep wrecks, but didn't want to. Will do best not to repeat locations unless you want to, always asked

where we wanted to go. Did 18 tanks in 5 days, and had a great time. Diving was good, and Jeff made it interesting in and out of water. The boat gets many repeat divers. Plenty of fish that are easily approached. Bucket with water for 35mm camera. Only one camera on the boat with 6 divers so no issues. If shooting video no rinse tank on board.

HMS Minnow, July 2004, David Lindaman (dwlindaman@sbcglobal.net) Kansas City, MO. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, choppy. The Minnow is a beautiful little boat that holds six divers (be sure and ask Capt. Jarvis why it is not a 'Ship'). It is well rigged with a tank bench in the center of the aft deck, back roll into the water and climb the fin ladder back on board. Jeff is always there take your gear back to the rack for you. He carries first aid and oxygen equipment on board and his navigational and communications gear is up-to-date. There are fresh orange slices, juice drinks and water available from the coolers. Jeff has a great sense of humor and my dive buddy and I always enjoy exchanging wise cracks and matching wits with him. Jeff works hard to get you to the dive site you want, but if he thinks the conditions are dangerous he won't put his divers in harm's way no matter how much you want to go. He gives good concise briefings with maps prior to each dive. I have seen all ages and all levels of divers have a great time. Great wrecks, great marine life and decent vis. If you are like me, landlocked in the Midwest with a limited dive budget, you just

can't beat Key Largo and the Minnow for a thrilling dive adventure at a great price. If you need Nitrox, rental gear, help with accommodations, dive training or want a dive guide, Jeff can set all of that up, all you have to do is ask.

Horizon Divers, Ramada Inn, April 2004, M. L. Moorman, Columbus, OH. Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm. Horizon Divers is a fantastic operation. I was just learning — did my checkout OW dives followed by four more days of diving. The crew was very helpful during my entire stay. They changed my gear about half of the time, which was fine with me — I didn't expect it anyway. Instructors were very thorough and patient. They taught me a lot in between dives about gear, travel, etc. As a beginner, I got continued "instruction" from the crew throughout the week. Continuous helpful hints and they let me try multiple pieces of their equipment (even one of their instructor's Scubapro reg). Boat is big and never felt cramped for space. Adequate rinse basins, anti-fog, head, refreshments, etc. They had everything from experienced divers with Nitrox to children. The crew accommodated them all with ease. All dives were shallow (25-35 feet) except for the last day. Went to Spiegel Grove last day with a dive-master guide. He did a great job of making sure I was comfortable with the dive plan and had no concerns before going deep (100 feet). Great time! The only thing I'll do different is not stay at the Ramada next door. They set it up for me and it was cheap

but very run-down and dirty.
(www.horizondivers.com)

Horizon Divers, Sea Dwellers, Ocean Divers Ramada Inn, July 2004, David Schwab (schwabd@bunt.com). Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 10 to 30 Meters. Water: 27 to 29 Celsius, calm. Horizon made all arrangements for accommodation at the Ramada Inn, next door. Rental gear was old, but in good shape. Discount for signing up for six dives. Capable captain and crew; plenty of room on the boat. Water and juice available. Captain didn't hesitate to pull my assigned buddy out of the water when he was having trouble (good move). Starting on day two the boat was out of commission with an engine problem . . . lost that day of diving. Horizon referred me to Sea Dwellers for day three, and on day four, since Horizon wasn't going where I wanted, they referred me to Ocean Divers. Good deal! I got to dive with three operators . . . all at Horizon's discounted dive rate. Day Three (Sea Dwellers): returned to the same sites as day one (*#@&); dive operation was good. Day Four (Ocean Divers): highlight of the trip was the USS Spiegel Grove; lots of current; divers had to hold on to a line or the wreck itself, or risk being swept away. This dive ended too soon. All three dive operators ran professional operations; solid crews, clean and roomy boats, lots of consideration for safety. Boat captains took roll at the end of each dive so no one got left behind. Only real negative: repeat dives on the same sites (because they were close to port?).

It's a Dive, Marriott Resort, June 2004, Mark K. Dreusicke (mdreu@aol.com) Iowa City, IA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 72 to 75 F, choppy, no currents. These folks are no pressure, friendly and professional. They have a couple of boats and don't overload them with divers. They are punctual, so don't be late. Dive briefings are thorough, but not long winded. The divemasters help those needing help, before being asked. My wife and daughter (nondivers) were going to snorkel around a reef while my son and I dove it. The water was fairly choppy and one of the staff said that it may not be a good day for snorkelers. My wife and daughter decided to hang at the pool instead. It's a Dive staff was concerned about the customer's experience and not just another few bucks in the register. I had prepaid for the event and they gave me back the money without me having to ask. The Marriott is on the same property and could not be more convenient to the dive shop. Good value in the dive packages. (www.itsadive.com)

Quiescence, Marriott, May 2004, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net) Elmhurst, IL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 40 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, choppy, surge. This was my 4th time with Quiescence and it is a fine operation with 3 6-diver boats. The staff and boat captains are friendly and experienced. Virtually every Keys native I encountered on this trip complained about the windy weather they had experienced throughout the winter of 2003-2004. Conditions were not ideal but we made the best of it. The

Marriott is a satisfactory selection and it is next door to Quiescence. Fish life seemed more abundant and mature than on previous trips. The Florida Keys remains a very viable choice, especially for those looking to log a good deal of bottom time on reefs & wrecks while staying in the USA. UW Photography Comments: Space and facilities are limited. (www.keylargodiving.com)

Quiescence Dive Services, Best Western Key Largo Suites, September 2004, Martin Raffauf (mraffauf@us.ibm.com), San Carlos, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 87 Fahrenheit, calm. They take a max of six divers per boat. Boats are 30 ft, with shower, but no heads. Most sites are close to shore, i.e. reefs and the Benwood Wreck. The big wrecks, the Duane, Bibb and Spiegle Grove are about 6 miles off shore on the edge of the Gulfstream. If you are not an advanced diver, or have made a deep dive in the past 6 months, they make you take a divemaster (\$50 charge). The days we went had little to no current, We did three tanks on the Spiegle Grove, sunk last year. It is some 530 feet long and on its side in 135 feet, with a approx 60 ft beam, so the shallowest part of the wreck amidships is about 70 feet. There is some good coral growth already and there are some good swim thru's. We explored the bridge which is about 95 feet, and traverse the galley area. There is a lot of fish life,. Several large Barracuda patrol there. Quiescence is very good. The people are knowledgeable. A divemaster can be hired as an extra. Rates, without divemaster are \$65 for two

tanks and weights. Nitrox is available. They have a cooler on board. you can bring your own food and drinks. The Best Western suites is two story suite motel with full kitchen and two baths, located on one of the canals at mile marker 100. The AC works, but it is a generic hotel, no restaurant or pool or anything else. There are plenty of decent places to eat.

SCUBA-Do, HMS Minnow, October 2003, Eric Lavonas (lavonas@pobox.com), Charlotte, NC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 F, choppy, surge. 3 days of diving in Key Largo — 2 with SCUBA-Do, 1 with HMS Minnow. SCUBA-Do: Boat accommodates 16 divers but carries max 10. Excellent physical layout. Laurie is enthusiastic — make sure you have logbook w/deep dives if you want to dive local wrecks with SCUBA-Do! Excellent site briefings. Tony and Laurie are safety-conscious and keep things smooth. Extremely professional outfit. Highly recommend diving on the Spiegel Grove, but get there early to avoid crowds. (SCUBA-Do leaves 30 minutes earlier than other boats for this reason.) HMS Minnow: Much smaller boat (6 divers max). Dove the Duane — an even better site than Spiegle Grove because it's upright. We had 4 divers — it would have been a little tight with a full boat. Jeff Jarvis is laid-back and efficient. Oranges between dives and beverages (water, soda, and beer) for the ride home. Definitely good to avoid the cattle boats and dive with these guys. Holiday Isle Resort (Islamorada): Rooms OK, resort over-

all a bit shabby. Tiki-bar was loud and a meat-market. At least on the weekend, it's not the place to sip beers in peace. Ollie's restaurant has mediocre food and service. Overall 2 stars. Safety/courtesy problem observed: Another dive boat (Silent World) moored right on top of the bubbles of our divers doing their safety stop on the Spiegel Grove. When our captain politely pointed this out and asked Silent World to shorten their mooring line for the safety of his divers, the captain of Silent World refused and became visibly angry and profane. (www.scuba-do.com)

Key West

Key West Diving, October 2003, Ken Vasey, Littleton, CO. Shop visit went well — nice and friendly. Arrived the following morning but due to rough seas dive canceled in the am. Was told to come back at 1pm. Got back to the shop to be told dive canceled. The dive shop decided to leave messages on my home phone in Colorado that dive in the afternoon was canceled due to a part needing replacement on the boat, despite the owner telling us it was the weather. So the weather was an excuse. Rescheduled next day, seas still very rough. When we got to the boat we decided that it could not be the right boat, but the T-shirt on the divemaster smoking on the deck confirmed my fears. We picked a small dive op no more than 6 divers at a time. I already counted 9. We spent some time going through the milk crate trying to find two weights that matched. The deck was littered with gear no place to store

equipment or to sit. First dive the Cayman Salvage Master. The divemaster informed us that due to the current he would rig a transverse line to the main down line on the wreck standard SOP. So into the water we go; the transverse line was now pinned up under the boat and useless. Waited for my buddy and told her to ignore their instructions as they were obviously clueless. So we could see the wreck down line and made our way to it. The current was moving at a fair clip away from the boat. So we drifted a short distance along the deck and then decided to make the hard swim back the bow of the wreck and hang there for a few minutes using up our bottom time. We made our ascent and stopped at the 15ft mark to do a 5 min deco stop. My buddy hung on the line, while I stayed off the line, it was at that point three other divers decided they wanted to be there also, so I beckoned to my buddy to hang midwater with me. So now we have 9 plus divemaster trying to do a safety stop on the anchor line. Back on the boat trying to rig our tanks in 6 foot seas. First you have to find your gear which has been ceremoniously been piled up in corner along with everyone else's. So we sat on the floor and tried not to get hit with the constant dropping of tanks. The tank holders could not hold the tanks in place and kept falling to the deck so I just laid my down as it already had fallen twice on me. Then the divemaster leaped into the water, fins in hand (showing off), then discovered it is easier if you put your fins on first then get into the water when you have 6 foot seas. Second dive: as we made our water entry the

Captain announced that a Lions Mane jelly was at the back of the boat. Well knowing how big and dangerous they are I was surprised to see him still letting divers get into the water. In fact it was just a large moon jelly approx. 14" across nothing like the massive Lions Mane with tentacles nearly 100ft long. So we get in and swim the direction of the reef as instructed and down we go, again the boat is anchored up current so we were been swept a good rate in the opposite direction of the boat. We did however get to spend 10 mins swimming with a large nurse shark. Then spent the next 20 mins trying to swim back to the boat. On the way back spent most of the trip holding three tanks against the feeble tank holders to stop them from falling on soft toes. Went to rinse our gear but no rinse tank, guess we will have to do that back at the hotel. Then before being allowed to leave the boat we were presented with a very pushy captain explaining how this over weight hung over smoking divemaster would starve if we did not tip him. I will not be so quick to suggest to friends to dive the Florida Keys in future until there is some standard to which these dive operations have to adhere to stay in business and stop taking advantage of poor unsuspecting divers looking for a pleasant dive vacation. (www.keywestdivingsociety.com)

Subtropic, West/Banana Bay, October 2003, Paul Brown (pbrown@fedex.com) Cordova, TN.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, calm. Larger boat was out of service so we were a bit crowded on the smaller one. Diving

was poor. We had a family emergency and needed to leave Key West a day early and Banana Bay would not relieve us of the cost of the night we would not use. However on the drive back to Miami we stopped at Amy Slates Amoray Resort where we had reserved four nights and three days of diving and explained the situation and they said no problem and did not charge us anything. (www.subtropic.com)

Marathon Key

Reef Runner, April 2004, Bert Brown, (papax4@comcast.net), Eugene, OR.
Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 Fahrenheit, choppy, no Currents. We found the Reef Runner through Captain Ed @ Discount Divers (www.discountdivers-bandb.com) in Marathon. Two of us could charter the Reef Runner for \$240, have the boat all to ourselves, with up to 5 dives depending on dive locations. Captain Sam Watson would take us wherever we pleased. When we booked our one day trip, we were the only two divers. Captain Sam does not accompany divers as a divemaster. The morning of the trip, we were informed that one other diver, Carol, would be going along. This put us between a rock and a hard place; if we go, we will have to dive as a threesome, and if we cancel, the trip would be a bust. Carol was a great person, a good diver, & was a positive addition to the experience. Our fee dropped from the \$120 each to \$98 each. Our first dive was on the R/V Thunderbolt (<http://thefloridakeys.com/dive/divesites/thunder.htm>) a great wreck dive. Captain Sam tied us onto

one of the buoys; little current, and great visibility. A giant Goliath grouper was hiding below deck, and swam deeper into the wreck, through passages too narrow for a big guy like me to follow. We bottomed out at 123 feet, and lasted 27 minutes. Our second dive was on Horseshoe Reef, with a maximum depth of 28 feet. Pretty shallow, but full of all kinds of sea life, great for the biomarine junky. We found a small nurse shark which we casually followed for quite awhile, and snapped several pictures. We spent 83 minutes on this reef until we finally came up for a break. Dive three was supposed to be on a 65 foot mini wall. Captain Sam dropped us off with instructions to "Go thataway" toward the wall, which we didn't, and ended up spending 52 minutes, at a max of 54 feet exploring the sand bottom, and several coral head outcroppings isolated from the normal reef. Our fault, we only had one compass, and I don't want to go into how it made us fin in a big circle. We still saw a multitude of sea life, The fourth dive, a shallow reef dive, with plenty of sea life/ 34 minutes @ max of 24 feet. We docked back at Captain Sam's home on a canal inlet, helped load the gear into his Suburban, then drove back to Discount Divers to transfer the gear. Captain Sam informed us that our bill was \$128 each. Explaining the extra \$30 was for the air fills. We had used 4 cylinder each @ \$7.50 each. We had incorrectly assumed the air was covered in the \$98 price for the dive trip. First time ever were we billed for air fills as a separate expense. So, begrudgingly, we forked over \$260. Capt. Ed & Sam are nice guys, howev-

er. This is a 33 ft day tripper, style cabin cruiser. I brought my Sony pocket sized DSC-P5 digital camera in an underwater housing, and got great pictures. (www.floridadivecharter.com)

Polk County

Off The Wall Divers, February 2004, Kyle O'Malley, Le Center, MN. Vis: 0-2 feet. Water: 60-65 F. Dives logged: 150+. Dove the wreck of a B-17 that crashed into a lake in 1940 (not able to give the name of the lake — I was a guest and sworn to secrecy!). Rented gear through Off the Wall Divers of Lakeland, FL (they may be able to connect you with a guide). The gear was very good. Service was good and prices reasonable. Diving not fun, more of an expedition into history. Black water diving only 15 ft deep, but once you touched bottom/wreckage vis went to inches. Lake full of gators — kept your imagination on edge! (3 years previous, 2 of us took 12 ft gators during the hunt season on nearby Lake Kissimmee.) We did find 40-50 pieces of airplane scattered over 2 mile. Some interesting O2 tanks, flight controls, gauges, along with a lot of pieces too big to move/identify. Told there are a couple B-17's fairly intact in other lakes. Know some people view these excursions as a violation of sacred things, personal opinions I guess. Was a Naval Aviator/USMA UH-1 "Huey" pilot myself; 2 good friends left on the bottom of the oceans. I always felt it far better someone would come along and bring something from those tragedies up to the light of day, to display and keep alive through researching and to

reminisce about their lives, and their last flight. (www.offthewalldivers.com)

West Palm Beach

Coral Island Charters, July 2004, Steven Kovacs, Naples, FL.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 Fahrenheit, choppy. Coral Island Charters in Palm Beach assured us several times that because we were the first to sign up for that day we could choose any site from the list on their web site. Underway we asked the captain if he was taking us to the site we wanted, but he said neither that he nor the divemasters had heard of that site. After informing the Captain that it was listed on their web site he stated he didn't even know they had a web site. Any dive is better than no dive so we decided to make the best of it. This is a typical cattle boat where they pack around 30 divers on board and then instruct everyone that they want them to follow the divemaster. The diving was good typical Palm Beach diving with decent viz and decent coral and tropical fish life. At the end of the first dive my buddy and I surfaced within view of the dive boat, which immediately saw us and began to head over to us to pick us up. No wait time, no problems. However when we climbed up the ladder the divemaster had the audacity to start yelling at us that the safety sausages should have been inflated, that's what they're for. Huh? A big cattle boat where everyone is treated like a beginner. (561-832-4800)

Jim Abernathy Scuba Adventures, DivingR.us, Pura Vida Divers,

Marriott Ocean Pointe, May 2004, Richard Rodriguez (richrodjr@sbcglobal.net) Arlington, TX.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy, surge, currents. We had planned on four days of two tank diving with Jim Abernathy's Scuba Adventure, but boat problems (two were recently sunk in a crane accident at the pier, the remaining boat developed a gas tank leak the day we arrived), ended us up being farmed out to other dive operations. Anna Abernathy was very diligent about ensuring we did not miss a single dive based on the reservations we made previously with her. We were sent out with DivingR.us on the first day and found this to be an overall disaster. The boat was overcrowded, weather was rough and viz very poor. Abernathy's provided the DM's. Cicily, although very nice, was lacking in many areas. Very little briefing prior to either of the dives and we were basically on our own while on the boat and in the water. She was more interested in diving with a friend who was on the boat than attending to us. She was back on the boat before we finished each of our two dives that day, running out of air on the first, then getting cold on the second. The DivingR.us boat, The Narcosis, is purported by their website not to take out more than 20 divers, but our charter had nearly 30 on board. Capt. Ray Davis was very knowledgeable and friendly. We dove Elevator, Breakers Reef and The Trench on our two tanks that day. Current was nearly nonexistent, but surge was heavy and viz was 15-20 ft. Corals appeared healthy and lots of tropical fish were found. It was turtle

mating season, and we found several large males and females resting on the bottom, presumably worn out between mating sessions. We did spot a large Goliath grouper at the end of The Trench. I will say that the chaotic nature of our first dive day was likely due to last minute boat problems with Abernathy's. The remaining three days were chartered with Pura Vida Divers. Brian Cripes was assigned as our DM the remainder of the week and proved to be quite competent. Brian is a college student from Michigan and was in Florida for the summer to work. He is an experienced wreck diver and it showed. He was very knowledgeable about the dive sites in WPB and did a good job of pointing out small creatures. Captain and guide, Trevor Wichmann, is a transplant from Oregon, but has been diving the WPB area for some time and is very knowledgeable about all the sites. When Trevor says "dive, dive, dive," you need to get in the water and under quickly, as the surface currents are strong and could quickly take you away from the dive site. The Sirena is a very capable dive boat and we never had more than ten divers on board. On 5/17/04 we dove Mid-Reef and Toy Box/Playpen. Again, healthy reef was found, along with large schools of fish. Barracuda were prevalent and very curious, and we were able to explore to the limits of our computer and air. On 5/19/04 we dove Shark Canyon and some wrecks, which WPB is noted for. Trevor informed us that sharks were not as prevalent since feeding them was stopped last year. We managed to see a nurse, lemon and very curious reef

shark, none of which came too close. On our second tank we went down on the Mizpah and spent time down in the open holds of the ship. We found them to be full of all kinds of fish and a few turtles. One of our group spotted a large Goliath grouper. Strong currents had resumed by today, so it was a short drift over to the Amaryllis. We found it to basically be just a gutted hull, but it was large and full of coral, sponges and fish. Our last day of boat diving took us to Governor's Reef Riverwalk, Dive-A-Rama and Rockpiles. Governor's Reef Riverwalk is a group of four wrecks sunk about two years ago at the order of Gov. Jeb Bush. These boats were confiscated and sunk after being caught as rug runners. They are in much better use now, providing lots of opportunities to see new corals and lots of fish. Large Angels (grays and queens) butterfly fish, trunkfish and spiny puffers were abundant, as were large spiny lobsters and stingrays. Don't miss out on making a night dive under the Blue Heron Bridge. You won't be able to get out unless it is slack tide. Marine life in miniature was abundant. Quarter size flounder, sergeant majors, scorpionfish and other tropicals hung close to and in between the bridge pilings. I have also never seen so many octopus in such a small area. Most allowed us to handle them. Be careful of the stingrays, not always easy to see at night, guitarfish were also plentiful. On the way back to the beach we also swam with a foot long Spanish dancer! WPB is good for drift diving (very strong currents may not be good for new divers, some in our group had problems), wrecks and healthy reefs. We saw turtles on every

dive, both under and on the surface. Bring seasickness medication if you get queasy, seas on a calm day are 2-3', we had them at 6-8' on the roughest day. The boat did not have a rinse tank for cameras, but did have a fresh water hose to wash equipment off between and after dives. (www.scuba-adventures.com)

North Carolina

Atlantis IV Charters, 2004, Harry Whiter (harrywhite@rcn.com) New York, NY. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 29 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 80 F, calm. First rate boat, Captain and crew. Would not go out when conditions were bad unless divers insisted; some boats would take you to a rotten but safe dive to collect a fee — not this boat. A truly straight operation. Dives were on wrecks, although at some point, wrecks begin to resemble reefs. Great dives. 6th time back (twice this year). Boat comfortable but not elegant. Most charters are reserved for returning groups so that newcomers catch as catch can. Very high level of renewals, for understandable reasons. As season wears on, likelihood of storms seems to increase but policy of no dive, no pay mitigates the weather risk. Stayed in beach house recommended by captain. Excellent; great value. (www.atlantischarters.net)

VIRGIN ISLANDS - BRITISH

Patch reef diving on these closely grouped islands is easy, pleasant, and fairly similar regardless of which island you choose,

although the quiet British Virgins and St. John are far less crowded and more pleasant than the cruise ship havens of St. Thomas and St. Croix, where hurricanes and fishing have taken a toll. . . . BVI is a yachter's paradise with crewed or bareboat sailboats galore, and it's also served by several land-based dive operations. . . . BVI has nice little hotels, good restaurants, congenial surroundings, and British style.

Cooper Island

Sail Carribean, Cooper Island Beach Club, November 2003, Mark Thorne (thorne@mindspring.com) Raleigh, NC. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. My gypsy dive buddies and myself have been all over the Caribbean for more than 10 years and we all agreed that this was one of our top dive destinations. The resort, the resort staff, the food, the dive operation, the dive boat, the dive staff, and the dives were as close to perfect as anyone could ask for in the Caribbean. The place is lined with graceful palm trees and a few sail boats moored in the protected bay. There were no jet skis or tourist-type activities on or around the island which created a true 'your-in ' paradise' atmosphere. Cooper Island Beach Club is a quiet, small operation, about 10 to 12 cottages, that takes pride in keeping the place neat and functional. Customer service was a high priority. The cottages run off of generators with no A/C but we all found the ceiling fans and the island breezes made the place com-

fortable. Sail Caribbean has a large 36-foot, new dive boat that was very roomy with lots of goodies like showers, a head, tank holders, easy water entry/exit, and plenty of shade. The divemaster was very accommodating to plan for dives that met our goals. The BVI dive sites are numerous and varied from reef to wreck dives. Most of the dives had minimal current. Rhone, this 130-year-old plus wreck, made for wonderful day and night dives. We saw a monster turtle sleeping under this wreck. The dives included a wide assortment of soft corals and tropical fish. The dives were mostly relaxing and interesting. Topside activities include eating fantastic food, sitting on the beach, swimming, sailing, kayaking, snorkeling, and taking out their 19' inflatable powerboats around the numerous islands. The restaurant serves up home cooked food that was varied and delicious. If you wish to cook for yourself, the cottages are fully furnished with a fridge, stove, and all the pots and pans you could ask for. Boat with large camera table and dedicated large rinse bucket. (www.cooper-island.com)

Tortola

Dive Tortola, January 2004, Catherine Gankofskie, Kennesaw, GA. Experience: 200+ dives. Vis: 90 to 100 feet. Water 79 F. Decided to try Dive Tortola after having a great experience at their other operation, Dive Provo in Turks & Caicos. Excellent level of service at both locations. As a single traveler, I felt like I was at home. (www.divetortola.com)