

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)

UNITED STATES

Texas

MV Spree/MV Fling, Gulf Diving, August 2004, Mark Parker (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)

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) **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

favorite is Alice in Wonderland, open to the southern sea and often rough. All sites at the Dogs are great; we saw a slipper lobster. We often find snorkel sites are like nurseries with baby fish of many species. On one snorkel we found ourselves with 3 barracuda and 11 tarpon. We provision ourselves, and plan all meals aboard except half the dinners and a couple lunches. We moor a couple of days at the Bitter End to allow crew a shore day, everyone on their own. We often dive with Kilbride's to explore new sites. Ten days on a boat can test relationships, so pick your group carefully. Everyone is assigned a job and cooking tasks are shared. There are small grocery stores throughout the islands, and a little shopping. (www.bareboatsbvi.com)

Cuan Law, November 2003, Phil Tobin (Philtobin6625@yahoo.com) Portland, OR. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy, surge, currents. The trip advertises "not for beginners" and this is true. My wife and I had about 100 dives before we signed up and honestly some dives were in current that was stronger than anything we had experienced. "Diamond Rock" we both sucked down 3/4 of our tanks in about 15 minutes. It was all we could do to grab the sandy bottom and hang on. We averaged about 3 dives a day, but the captain had to change the schedule because of the weather. The diving was often deep; "The Eye Of The Needle" off of Saba was a 90 foot drop down with heavy surge, and then we swam down to 140 feet around this magnificent pinnacle. We made two passes around this spire and then headed up, making several

stops on the way. The *Rhone* was an outstanding wreck and we had the whole ship to ourselves. We hung out with a spotted eagle ray for over 10 minutes as he made several passes over the bow of the *Rhone*. Sombrero Island was fantastic. The Grotto was my favorite dive at the island. Terrible weather. Getting on the tenders with 10ft swells was always "An Adventure." The staff was better than outstanding, particularly Alex who was one of the divemasters. There was always a divemaster in the water with us, and we had our choice of hanging out with him or doing our own thing. Safety was their first concern. Stayed at the Serendipity guest house one night before and one night after, which was the best thing we could have done coming from the west coast. It is nothing special, but the beds were comfortable, and we ate just down the washed out street at another hotel. Because of all the rain, the visibility was poor. Overall, it was a great trip and ten days was just not enough. This was the *Cuan Law's* "Adventure Trip" and believe me it was an adventure. We had seas with 14 foot swells and torrential rains like the area hasn't seen in 25 years. We saw the sun for about 12 hours during the 10 days of the trip. The ship was just not set up to deal with the driving rain. It had bad leaks around most of the portholes. Other than the weather, which they had no control over, it was a fantastic trip and we would do it again in a minute. It is a bit overpriced, but the service was first class, the food was outstanding, and the diving was unbelievable. The boat was beautiful and well maintained. (www.divecuanlaw.com)

Cuan Law, August 2004, Gene Tinelli (genet43@twcny.rr.com), Jamesville, NY. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. First live-aboard and it was outstanding. Annie and Duncan Muirhead run an excellent show. The crew was great. A lot of fun plus intelligent conversation. Gourmet eating. Incredible vessel. A 105' x 44' trimaran, real toilets and showers in each of the ten large staterooms. Plenty of privacy. Beautiful boat under sail. UWP: Dedicated wash tank, very good staff/diver coordination of gear, some AV capabilities

Cuan Law, August 2004, Noel Hall (noelhall@aol.com), Louisville, KY. Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 Fahrenheit, calm. The *Cuan Law* is a sailing/power trimarine which is big. The accommodations are large, clean, air conditioned and very adequate. The meals are taken on the back, under cover, in the open air. The salon is large and comfortable, the video lounge is a separate room with a television, DVD/VHS, and a nice selection of movies. The *Cuan Law* does not promote only scuba diving, and therefore offer a morning dive, an afternoon dive, and night dive on each day. If the boat is on a mooring, additional dives off the boat are generally permitted. Otherwise, the staff offers multiple other water sports, such as water skiing and Hobie sailing. The boat holds 20 guests in 10 double staterooms, but this boat is large enough to absorb a full boat of guests without a problem. A nice feature is the toilets are standard "land type" and no one experienced any problems common with "marine type" toilets. The

food service was very good, with nice wines served with each evening meal. I couldn't get Daniel (the cook) to make coffee before 7:00 am, so might as well sleep until breakfast is ready. The staff was very accommodating and professional. Diving is generally off one or both, of the large dinghies, which have ladders for easy return from the water. The divemasters/instructors were very skilled and paid close attention to divers in the water. However, divers were allowed to dive their computers and create their own profile by advising the divemaster in advance. Depth is not much of a problem because most of the BVI diving is above 80 feet. I found the diving in British Virgin Islands much better than my experience in St. Thomas, on par with some other good Caribbean dive locations. The captain and the staff would put up the sails whenever the winds were favorable, and we would "motor" whenever they were not.

Juliet, February 2004, Paula Felver (paula@felver.com) Hamilton, IN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 35 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. Juliet generally goes out of Miami to the Bahamas but was ported in St. Thomas for the winter months. It is a 104' 3 masted schooner with 4 sails. There were 12 passengers and 4 crew members, all experienced with three of them being captains. The food was excellent and plentiful with all of the alcohol you wanted at the end of the dive day. The accommodations are excellent. There is plenty of storage and plenty of fresh water. The drinking water and Gatorade thermos containers were always full. There are three heads

and two showers below deck plus a fresh water shower on deck for use after each dive. There is Nitrox available. The dive briefings were excellent with dive-master, John Skey always going in before hand to check out the current, surge etc. The dingy was always on hand if you got too far from the boat. This sailboat has a unique ladder for getting back into the boat. It is mounted in the middle of the boat and attached parallel to the boat. It is the most stable ladder I have ever used and was the easiest time I've ever had getting back into the boat. Crew pampered photographers. This was an excellent boat and crew. The diving was not quite as good as in the Bahamas. The wrecks were great. I missed the dolphins and sharks but the eagle rays, turtles, stingrays, lobsters and eels made it worthwhile. The coral had good color and the small fish were excellent. I loved finding the flamingo tongue snails and doing macro photography. We did 4 dives a day and 5 shore excursions. We left St. Thomas on Saturday around 3:00 p.m. and did our first dive the next morning. We had beginner divers as well as experienced divers. They accommodated all of us. One diver was doing their check-out dives for open water certification and they took care of him by taking him to shore in the dingy so that they could do their dives without taking anything away from the experienced divers. My favorite dive sites included *The Rhone* wreck (the bow and the stern), Rhone Reef, and Alice in Wonderland. We had excellent night dives. The fish life was really out and the turtles and lobsters were the biggest I've seen anywhere. The shore excursion I enjoyed the most

was going to Virgin Gorda to The Baths. It was a beautiful trail with large granite boulders all around. We had the ultimate surface interval each day with the crew putting the sails up and we all just sat back and enjoying sailing on the ocean. Some of the passengers helped put up the sails. It is a beautiful sailboat with wood trim below deck. Big galley and area for us to eat in. It was equipped with a TV, DVD, tape player, stereo equipment and best of all karaoke. They had many movies for entertainment in the evenings and Chris, our cook was also a marine biologist. She showed us educational videos and helped us understand and identify the fish we were seeing on each dive. Captain John did everything he could to get the best dive sites that the weather would permit. It was always a little windy and we did not get to dive the Tobago area because it is always exposed and the wind was too strong. No one got sea sick. I've done many other live-a-boards and this one is an excellent value as well as the topnotch operation. They have an office manager who works with you before hand to get all of the paper work out of the way so that once you are on the boat, everything just goes smoothly. Check out www.felver.com/scuba for pictures of this dive trip. Separate water tank for cameras with no masks in that tank enforced. Camera area below deck for charging and storing. Cameras were always handed to you after you were in the ocean. They were always picked up from you prior to you boarding the boat after the dive. They always handled the cameras with utmost care.
(www.sailjuliet.com)