

and bag the keepers. It wasn't easy! The DM, myself, and another diver brought back 6 from the 1st dive. Saw a shark, turtle, and a large variety of Caribbean fish, large and small, while looking for lobsters. We surfaced, did our surface interval and moved to the other side of the island. Vis was half the 1st dive and not nearly as interesting but we did get another large lobster. Long bumpy ride back to Frenchmen's Reef dock where we stayed. They gave me a container to carry my lobsters back to the room where we iced them down in the bathtub until dinner. The chef at the Blue Havana (there at the Marriott Morningstar Resort) had agreed to prepare them if we brought some back. The newly opened restaurant had never done that before and the waitstaff was buzzing about it. The chef seemed truly excited when we told him to "do his own thing" with the lobsters. Our 25th anniversary dinner couldn't have been more excellent or memorable. Rinse tank for cameras.

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## WIDER CARIBBEAN LIVE-BOARDS

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### THE BAHAMAS

**AquaCat, February 2005, Anne Efron, Baltimore, MD.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F., calm. This was our first liveboard and it couldn't have been better (except for the water temperature). 4-5 dives a day offered, depths from 30 - >100 feet, drifts were great, small blue hole okay, some wonderful 'aquarium' type dive

sites and some mediocre. Out of water options included deserted beaches, fishing, kayaking and a snorkel lobster hunt. Food was great, plentiful, and always with several options.

**AquaCat, May 2005, Ronald Johnson (Grtday@msn.com), Katy, TX.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm, no currents. We've never been on a live-aboard where the crew anticipated our needs as well as this group did. One crew member for every two guests. They were all spectacular. Unfortunately the lettuce algae is taking over the Exumas. It is smothering the coral and needs to be pulled up or more sea urchins need to be introduced. The Aquacat group is to do just that. Several were disappointed in the visibility and lack of fish. I was busy with my eye to my camera and it was great for me! Cabin 11 is small, cramped, and should come with a significant price discount. We were on the Aquacat in September of '03 and the fish were much more plentiful! The Captain asked to see my log book and made sure to take us places that we had not visited in 2003. We made it to Little San Salvador. Ask to dive "The Washing Machine." What a spectacular adventure! 8-10 foot sharks who know their place in the food chain. Well orchestrated and safe dive. Aquascapes were beautiful, fish OK, macro stuff was sparse.

**AquaCat, May 2005, Terry R. Garland, Naples, FL.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, choppy. I wish that I had of known that the water was as cold as it was. From the time we arrived 18 of us were catered

to constantly. The seas were rough as hell the first two days, but the Captain ran us to Eleuthera to help the seacock tolerate it. We had great diving on steep walls, coral reefs, fantastic night dives, great gourmet food, endless snacks, warm towels, plenty of liquor, great shark dives, shore excursions for those who wanted them, a general feeling of being appreciated by the entire crew. The coolest part of the trip was the washing machine. Not going to try to explain but better than an amusement park ride. They treated my camera (Canon Rebel with Ikelite housing) like it was gold. The crew showed utmost concern for my expensive investment, including making sure it always was rinsed and placed in my hands from the dive platform. I did 26 dives in six days and had my camera on 25 of them.

**AquaCat, July 2005, Bill Shepherd (Chorsejbs@aol.com), Satellite Beach, FL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Second trip on the Aqua Cat and impressed by the quality of service, facilities, and crew. One of the best live-aboards despite location. Dove the Exumas and Eleuthera so sites were not “over dived” and fish and critters plentiful. Five dives per day, including night dives. Good selection of wall dives offering variety at depth as well as a more leisure pace atop the wall. Favorite dive sites included a shark feed dive and several “high speed” drift dives. Crew maintains a positive attitude, places an emphasis on diver safety, and treats divers as responsible guests. Boat well maintained and cabins roomy and clean. Large salon and dining area able to easily accommodate all divers at one

seating. Lots of hot water and adjustable AC thermostats in each cabin. Chef Kirk who does an outstanding job of preparing and presenting tasty meals and snacks. Excellent value! Roomy tables on dive deck to accommodate divers’ cameras and accessories. Charging stations also available on dive deck. Knowledgeable staff to assist and do E6 processing on request.

**AquaCat, July 2005, Jack Gullo Jr. (jgullo@carr.org), New Windsor, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm. A great trip — helpful/friendly crew. Luggage was delayed for many on the inbound trip — boat altered plans; loaned gear; and did all the work to track and recover the bags! Cabins were clean and quite big with lots of storage space — as big as a cruise ship cabin. Great dives, although the reef was not in great condition. Optional shore trips were great, as was a nighttime beach campfire party. Interesting drift dive — the washing machine — lots of fun. Food and facilities were outstanding. A first class operation. Shark dive was exciting. Nitrox available. Camera table; designated rinse tank; high pressure air; processing facility; picture contest.

**AquaCat, July 2005, Michael Marmesh, (memarmesh@aol.com), Miami, FL.** Experience: 250+ dives. Water: 82-88 F. The captain did a good job picking dive sites considering a group from a Mississippi dive shop was on board with a couple of divers having less than 10 dives logged. Shallow coral heads, walls, blue holes and a couple of drift dives including “Washing Machine”, which was a blast due to high tides

during a full moon. A shark dive was offered, with signed consent. Didn't participate due to moral opposition to making wild animals behave abnormally. We don't feed bears in national parks or toss pets and marshmallows to the alligators that pop up in our backyards here in Florida. Next dive, no consent forms were offered at the same site with sharks still present, but with nothing for them to eat. They came close enough to sex them by their claspers. Heavy algae growth a problem in some areas, especially wails off Eleuthera. Caused decreased coral population and fish life. Not surprising considering got 85 degree readings at 100 ft. Fish life better in the Exumas Land and Sea Park greater numbers and bigger size. Schools of silky sharks mating in blue hole a great last dive. In 3-4 foot seas boat rocked pretty good on its beam books off shelves and one of the southern ladies "lost my vittles." Crew was young, energetic and helpful. Most hadn't been aboard long so briefings were read out of a notebook. Food was good and plentiful. Draft beer and open bar also included. Nitrox and, for large air suckers like myself, 100 cu. ft. tanks available. (One morning one of my tanks was leaking where the valve screwed in — how often are tanks that may be filled 20-f times/wk. visualed and hydroed?) Cabins large and comfortable, with maid service daily. Several shore excursions. Overall, quite enjoyable trip with good boat and crew.

**Blackbeard's Cruises, Sea Explorer, October 2004, Jim Sanders (jimsanders@buffalo.com), Buffalo, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. The

Gulf Stream seas were rough, it was dark, and I'm no sailor. I took a couple of motion sickness pills. We left Miami on schedule at 9 p.m. Friday for our long-weekend cruise. My girlfriend and I went below to sleep in our shared berth. Another couple was in the bunk above us. It was pitch black, waves were pounding the hull, and the boat was moving back and forth, up and down, back and forth, up and down. I lasted about 10 minutes. Out the side of the bunk I went with just enough time to get one sandal on, and bolted up the ladder to the deck. There went my supper, lunch, and breakfast. For the next 6 hours I must have tossed my cookies 10,000 times. I didn't care that I was soaked from waves. I didn't care what kind of nasty sounds were coming from me. I would have paid anything for my own bed. But hey, 6 hours goes by fast when you feel like that (yeah, right), and soon we were pulling into Bimini. It was time for breakfast. A half banana was all I dared try. We were going diving in less than an hour and I was going to get my money's worth. We were under motor power for the entire trip. One sail was raised during the initial crossing to stabilize us. They told us the weather was not conducive to sailing but later in the trip someone said there was a problem with a sail. It was disappointing. Diving was good but not outstanding, food was plentiful and well prepared, and the other divers were qualified. Out of the 10 dives my favorite was the shark feed, with plenty of Caribbean reef and nurse sharks and a safety-conscious crew. We followed a line down and were led to our "seats." The sharks were there, summoned by

the sound of the dinghy motor. Our backs were positioned to large coral mounds in a semicircle so there were not going to be any surprises. The feed was over in a short time. Silty conditions caused by the feeding frenzy did not allow many photo ops. During the briefing we were told about a possible encounter with "Fido," a tame baby nurse shark. I decided to sit in the sand and wait for a shark to come through a channel between the coral heads. Well, Fido comes along, hugging the bottom and getting closer. My fins were almost flat on the sand extended in front of my sitting position. Like a curious puppy, he put his snout right under my fins! I stroked him with my fins. He didn't leave. He started working his way up my body, snout still under my leg, and I started stroking his side, not knowing if I was going to scare him, hurt him or become his lunch. He did not try to leave. There were at least 5 other divers hovering behind me, taking pictures and just enjoying the show. As a caveat, I must say that I took a chance touching this animal. Being a logical guy (I fix computers for a living), I did not act in a logical way. I recently read of a diver who was bitten by a small nurse shark and the shark would not let go. Both the diver and the shark were brought to a hospital where the shark was surgically removed. UW Photography Comments: Rinse tank available; no table other than common table in galley.

**Blackbeard's Cruises, December 2004, Dan Benson (Dan@jsdive.com), Klamath Falls, OR.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 78 F, choppy, currents. This was a disaster trip! Wind, choppy. The scuba

compressor on board the boat broke half way through the trip. Shore power couldn't be connected, a diesel leak developed, and the electric generator broke, forcing many to sleep on deck! Crowded conditions. Save your money and go on a better live-aboard. Cheap isn't always best, especially when your vacation time is so valuable. UW Photography Comments: No camera table. The only table was dining table, occupied by eaters!

**Blackbeard's Cruises, April 2005, Larry (lschuth@eznet.net), Hilton, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 150 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy. Excellent shark feed. Fishing anytime the boat moved. At one site the vis was only 20 ft so I almost passed on the night dive but had an encounter with the largest turtle I have ever seen. (300-400lb) On a drift dive I saw a largest grouper hiding in a crevasse under a ledge. The DM said it was the largest he had seen. (400lb). The food was the best and plenty of it. Quarters are tight. You only set up your gear once for the week. Air fills are done while it is in a rack still set up. Large rinse barrel for cameras. Otherwise, you sleep with all your gear.

**Blackbeard and Aqua Cat, Cat Ppalu, May 2005, Pat Bridges (divergal@hotmail.com), Nashville, TN.** A well-designed 65' catamaran with 6 cabins of varying space, headroom and features, and a crew of four. Available deck space would be cramped with twelve divers; fine for the eight of us. Handy aft spray hose; plenty of sunning and reading deck space. Small camera rinse tank, but no table on deck.

The Cat Ppalu typically charts as a unit, but occasionally during the year it's available for individual bookings. I signed on as a single and was paired by chance with an equally enthusiastic and experienced roommate. The literature indicates departure from Nassau shortly after noon, allowing for two dives that afternoon, but in reality, we sat at the dock until 4 p.m. waiting for two late-sign ups who couldn't get an earlier flight at the last minute. Those of us who had flown in the night before and paid for hotel rooms were disappointed and feeling a little short-changed, but that was about the only flaw in this smooth-running operation. Stowage aboard is minimal so arrangements are made to leave large luggage ashore after unpacking. Since the boat cruises relatively slowly (six knots) fishing lines were typically out as we moved between dives. We were rewarded on this trip with the excitement of hauling aboard three dolphinfish (killed mercifully and quickly by generous oral applications of rum from the larder!) Fresh mahi mahi was an option on the menu from that day on. All dive sites are recorded using REEF location data, and REEF survey forms are provided aboard.. Dive briefings were thorough and accurate. The buddy system was encouraged but not mandatory. Usually there was no divemaster in the water with us hi a supervisory role, but always one on watch from the boat. Since May however, the captain and his 1st mate (literally, his wife) have moved to England and the chef has returned to his tuna fishing career, so I can't guarantee the next crew will be as efficient and harmonious as I experienced.

"Easy-going" is not to be confused with indifferent or unprofessional; it's a treat to be hi the company of a competent and organized crew who are personable as well. Value for the money: high for novice or intermediate divers, or for a small group looking to charter a whole boat for a week. Divers with world-wide experience will be uninspired by the terrain or the fish life overall. That said, safety stops were often hi the company of schooling horse-eye jacks, three-foot grouper, spadefish and/or nurse sharks. (Yeah, that's plural. Lots of sharks... schooling...around us.). We also shared the 76-degree water with blacktip sharks, sharpnose puffers in full color, honeycomb cowfish, golden hamlets, seven species of blennies (at least!), scrawled cowfish, and schools of juvenile sunshine fish. A closer inspection showed tunicates, decorator urchins, hydroid zoanthids, lots for the macro photographer. I'd recommend this trip.

**Caribbean Explorer, June 2005, Corey Brown (prod3@davidagencyinc.com), Richfield, MN.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, calm, no currents. It began its trek from Georgetown, Great Exuma and motored its way to Long Island, then Conception Island, San Salvador and back. My 20-year-old daughter, newly certified, joined me; she received terrific instruction from a temporary DM, Cedar (young guy from Alaska). After passing her four check out dives to complete her referral, she became my outstanding dive buddy for the rest of trip, which totaled 25 dives. The rest of the crew was just as amazing. Friendly, competent, and knowledgeable. When each of the six crew members weren't

attending to their usual duties, they were trading off diving the five dives a day with the 12 guests. Boat was comfortable, clean and showing little wear and tear. A/C was down right chilly in our cabins, but great to sleep in with cozy quilts provided. Though this is one of the company's older boats, even the engineer, Henry (So. Africa) commented it was his favorite one. We moved from site to site with amazing speed. Libby was a great chef. Meals to be quite tasty varied. Everything from BBQ ribs, to lightly fried grouper, and even a "Thanksgiving Night" with pumpkin pie. First day to Long Island where we dove shallow coral heads popping out of ultra white sandy bottom. Saw several cleaning stations with lots of the little cleaning shrimp Largest lobsters — I saw one taking a casual on the sand, pretty much the size of a Labrador! Anytime we hovered over the sandy bottom between reef structures, we encountered jaw fish and garden eels popping out. Days two and five we dove Conception Island, where we encountered three hammerheads, two reef sharks ( half minute as close as 4 ft away), several hawk bill turtles, and southern sea rays. No mantas or dolphins. Here we did a deep wreck dive (100'), and have to say fish life overall was a bit down, but coral and gorgonians were abundant and quite healthy. Best dive sites were to be found days three and four at San Salvador. So good, the offer to sacrifice a dive for a land visit- no one took up. Throughout the week, they gave us excellent dive briefings, and an option to join the crew on dives, otherwise dive your own profiles, as long as you dove no deeper than 130'

and had 500 psi back on board. We dove all five dives, but because we were diving air, we watched our computers carefully, as mid week dives began with 100' to 115' walls. I found it easy for us to stay out of the caution Ni loading zone since over half of even the deep dives could be spent over the top of well-populated reef structure on our returns to the boat. Saw scorpion fish, good size schools of jacks and grunts, huge Nassau groupers, parrots, tang, grey angels, giant lobsters and crabs on the night dives. Enjoyed a couple great swim throughs reminding me of Mary's Place/Calvin's Crack in Roatan — start out 60' or so and pop out at 115'. Great weather and calm seas throughout trip. Clean, uncluttered camera table, separate rinse tank, careful handoff from crew to diver and vice versa.

**Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, June 2005, Kelley (scubagirlkelley@gmail.com), Kirkland, WA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. The accommodations did not include space to store clothing that you were not wearing. A simple plastic tub under the bottom bunk would have made it easier to get organized. Air conditioning stopped working in our room, and it was too hot to sleep. The A/C didn't work well in the rest of the boat either, after about the 2nd day. The water pump (for fresh water) kept going on the fritz so you never knew if there was going to be water when you turned the tap on — always, it seemed, when I already had liquid soap on my hands! Noise was a problem, with that many people (10 divers plus 4 crew) on a 65-foot boat; whenever one person

put in a movie or CD everyone had to listen to it. The front deck was not accessible for most of the trip because that was where the bait for the shark dives was being stored. The shark diving was fabulous, the rest of it I could have done without. This boat is about a 4 day max, unfortunately it was a 7 day trip. UW Photography Comments: Expensive camera gear was stored on the floor of the "salon" where it was in the way, and subject to getting kicked and tripped over. Definitely a problem.

**Juliet, May 2005, Arik (arikolson@yahoo.com), New York, NY.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, currents. The Juliet is a great boat with an outstanding crew. The cabins were spacious with beautiful hardwoods and brass, nice windows, and the A/C always worked. I slept well. The crew was friendly, attentive, and knowledgeable. The food was hearty and tasty. No serious seasickness. One person had a mild case the first night, while crossing the Gulf Stream. The reef got better as we went south from Bimini and farther from civilization (and fishermen). There was some algae damage to the reef near Bimini but truly pristine reef in the far south near Orange Cay. As a beginning diver I felt the trip was perfect for me, as the diving was relaxed, deep and challenging only if I wanted it to be. Of the twelve passengers, I was the only beginner, and seven were experienced professional divers or dive instructors. These experienced divers were enjoying the excellent diving as well, diving deeper on some of the walls. Excellent camaraderie among the crew! The boat had a clean protected

rinse tank and we had a digital slide show each evening of other photographers pictures from the day.

**Nekton Rorqual, October 2004, Alan Radzun (chgodvr@yahoo.com), Oak Forest, IL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Don't leave home without some type of seasickness medications. No side to side motion but lots of forward and back. Though not bad considering the conditions of the seas. Service by the crew was outstanding!! Food was great (good job Goose); dieters beware. Breakfast, mid-morning cookies, lunch, mid-afternoon snack, dinner, and evening popcorn. Cabins were good. If you want a bigger cabin see NCL or Carnival. Hot towels, several camera rinse tanks, wetsuit rinse tank, hot shower, and mask dip bucket for diving. Cay Lobos trip. Long ... travel times. This cut down on the amount of diving. Some of the sites were pretty beat up from the hurricanes but seemed to be rebounding. Spent too much time on some sites, not enough on others. Large creatures were few and far between. Underwater beacon was weak. Fine on the first nite dive, weaker on the second, non-existent on the third.

**Nekton, May 2005, William (bboswell@marklang.com), Millersville, MD.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 Feet. Water: 72 to 77 F, choppy, currents. North West Bahamas trip. Don't believe that the Nekton service is seasick free, my wife along with others were sick on this trip for several hours or until the "patch" kicked in. We had a stand in captain, he should have stayed home. The rest of the crew

was great. Our first live aboard trip was not good.

## BELIZE

**Belize Aggressor III, August 2004, James Heimer (jmsjnk@earthlink.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, calm, choppy, no currents. The Aggressor III was well kept and well laid-out for diving. Although the accommodations were the smallest we have encountered on six live-aboards (only one person at a time could stand up and move about on the cabin floor and the double bed was partially overhung by a bunk, giving the “inboard sleeper” the feeling of being in a coffin), they were clean and we didn’t spend much time in them anyway. The cabins (except one) are on the bottom deck. Try to avoid cabin 8, which is farthest aft next to the engine room and gets a lot of noise when the boat is moving — which is not often during sleeping hours. The deluxe cabin on the top deck may be worth the extra money, if you want more space. The salon/dining area and dive deck are above the cabins. The dining area is divided into three 3-person and two 4-person tables. The salon has a large screen TV and DVD/VCR player and limited seating on sofas. The dive deck is directly aft of the salon and has spacious accommodations for the full load of 18 divers with plenty of room between tanks, storage bins under the seats, and hanging bars for wet suits above. Air filling stations are at each set of two tanks and nitrox is available. Entry is down steps from the dive deck to a wide platform

across the stern. Exit from the water was via ladders on each side. An inflatable was always on standby at the end of a tag line. A hang bar and emergency air second stage were deployed at 15’. The Aggressor is a single hull vessel and had a tendency to swing 90 degrees and more about the mooring. Sometimes it was out of view, when returning after a dive, but it would swing by, sooner or later. The top deck was partially shaded with an area for sunning and a bar area, plus the pilot house and deluxe cabin. The food was good, but not as good as that we have had on our other five live-aboards. There was plenty at each meal and snacks between dives. Wine, beer, and some alcohol were available après diving. The walls of Lighthouse Reef (Long Caye, Lighthouse Caye, etc.) are spectacular with healthy hard and soft corals. The bottom drops off from 20 to 30 feet under the mooring to several hundred feet on the wall. Turtles, sting and eagle rays, barracuda, large green and spotted morays, and grouper were the larger marine life encountered. The excellent dive staff participated in all dives and pointed out pipe fish, pipe horses, pike, sail and arrow blennies, net crabs, and juvenile fish species. The staff was as enthusiastic about the diving as the customers, and they would be in the water, whether or not anyone wanted a guided dive — photographing and exploring. On the return trip, Friday morning diving was at the less impressive Turneffe Islands (sloping rather than steep walls), but the last dive was joined by a family of dolphins. Overall, the condition of the reef was excellent, and the fish life was plentiful, but the larger stuff was sparse. The Aggressor