

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

leaves Belize City Saturday night and returns about noon Friday. The trip officially ends Saturday, you sleep aboard the Aggressor Friday night, but Friday dinner is on you). A Friday afternoon departure back to the US is possible if you skip the last night and morning dives. You can do up to 27 dives during the week (including a group dive to the Great Blue Hole), with the pool being open for two dives anytime between 8 and 11:45 a.m. in the morning and 2 and 5:45 pm at night, plus a night dive around 8 pm. Covered dive deck had spacious camera table with multiple shelves below for other sensitive photo gear and electrical strip for battery charging. Crew was knowledgeable about underwater photography and avid photographers themselves; helped divers with (all had digital cameras) set up and tips. Rental cameras (Olympus 4000 series or 5050 with Inon strobes) provided free of charge to those (2) who had cameras flood. Large rinse tank for cameras only at stern near dive deck. Only limitation was on ability to download and edit photos — boat had only one computer with small screen and limited installed software (i.e., no Photoshop), but did have universal card reader and ability to burn CDs.

**Belize Aggressor III, March 2005,  
Claude Koprowski, Oxford, MD.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F., calm, choppy. Fresh out from major mechanical overhaul and redecoration. The crew was phenomenal. Food was varied and good except meats tended to be overcooked. I had the best Mexican dinner I have ever had on board. There was variety and a willingness to please.

Cabins were clean, reasonably spacious with good water pressure in the showers and functioning, clean heads. The bunks were the ship's weakness. There was a large inferior bunk — I would guess about full size, and a superior bunk that was claustrophobic and so narrow that a sleeper could well roll off of it. The space between the two bunks would challenge a honeymooning couple. I suggest the upper bunks be removed and replaced with a higher storage rack that gives sufficient sitting room for the entire lower bunk. Many divers were seasoned and well-traveled. A group of us informally rated the trip as a 4-5 out of 10 basis. We went to the same 10-12 dive sites as the Nekton and Belize Dancer, just shifting from buoy to buoy each day. And the viz was often too cloudy for pristine photography. After all, this is the second largest reef in the world, and it seemed to most of us that they could develop better dive sites at more distant locales that could be used to shift away from local weather factors. Actually one of our best dives was on a site the captain had never been to before and was exploring.

**Belize Aggressor, September 2005, Ron Frankel (Scubajag@tampabay.rr.com),  
St. Petersburg, FL.** Experience: 251-500

dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm. Wonderful captain (Jay) and crew that did not overlook any detail. We bypassed several dive sites if the water was not crystal clear, and the crew allowed us to basically dive our own profiles. Nitrox used by most divers. They stressed safety. The diving was great. The food was served from a buffet, and you sit with your new friends in the spacious dining area. Cabins were

a bit crowded. The most forward cabin gets most of the wave action and our friend occupying that cabin lost quite a bit of sleep as the ship moved in the night. Blue Hole was awesome, as well as a visit to the National Park where there were awesome birds, iguanas, and interesting trees. UW Photography Comments: Excellent photo facilities, although no E-6 processing. Large camera tables, knowledgeable camera professional, and extra equipment.

**Nekton Pilot, January 2005, Jeffrey Bell (jeffkbell@aol.com), Mableton, GA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm, no currents. This is the first live-aboard for my wife and I must say WOW! 5 dives a day. The crew was excellent at making all guests feel right at home. The food was good, the rooms were better than we had anticipated, and the diving was excellent. No need for a lot of clothing so you can pack light. The Nekton provided the best of all worlds with as many dives as you could do and great accommodations on the water! Our best dive vacation to date! Very accommodating for photographers and knowledgeable about equipment. C-Lee was helpful!

**Nekton Pilot, March 2005, Bill Mosel, Rockaway, NJ.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. The crew was fantastic. Best live-aboard. Food was plentiful and good.

**Nekton Pilot, May 2005, James & Kandace Heimer (jmsjnk@earthlink.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F., calm. We did five days on

Lighthouse Atoll (walls) and one day at Turneffe (sloping bottom, coral heads). The wall diving was spectacular with 82+ degree water, 100 foot visibility, flat seas and warm, sunny weather. Hawksbill and loggerhead turtles, eagle and sting rays, tarpon, large grouper, barracuda, and a single manta ray were the major pelagics. Lobsters and crab abounded, plus all the usual tropicals. We were usually anchored within sight of the Belize Aggressor and Sun Dancer. The Nekton has a capacity of 33 divers — we had 27. They ranged from experienced tech divers to one couple doing their open water certification. The spacious lounge accommodated us all at dinner, and the Nekton dive deck approach avoided crowding there as well. The dive deck opens after a morning briefing from 8 to 11:45 and you are welcome to dive any time during that period. The ship repositions during lunch, and the deck opens again from 2 to 5:45. A night dive is conducted at the afternoon location after a presentation by a crew member — usually starts around 8:30. Diving is unsupervised, unless you request a guide by one of the divemasters, and you are free to dive your computer. Divers log themselves in and out of the dive deck on a “muster board.” The food was excellent — several members noted having to add lead to their weight belts during the week. Dinners ranged from prime rib to fish to bbq ribs and chicken. Lunches included a Mexican, sandwich, and hamburger buffets — soup was included at each. Breakfasts were hearty (eggs, pancakes, waffles, fruit, hot and cold cereal, home baked breads and rolls, and juice). One problem was delay

in getting from the airport to the boat on the vans that Nekton provided (via a hotel stop for dinner) — crowded and ran late — we were finally bedded down about midnight Saturday. One van ran out of gas leaving the boat for the departing flights. We had a lower deck room and experienced (as did most) moisture dripping from the chilled water piping that provide AC above the ceiling tiles. This dripped on bedding and the (rather worn) carpet, leaving damp spots. The marine heads in the bathrooms in each room could have benefitted from deodorizers. We liked the upper deck rooms from our first trip better. Separate rinse tanks for cameras maintained and enforced on dive deck and near camera tables one deck above; camera tables spacious with carpet surface; well set up for digital photography: 42 inch flat panel screen with computer hook-up to review photos, including video; limited software for photo enhancement available; no E6 processing; photo contest at weeks end (fun event, we were all amateurs).

**Sun Dancer II, April 2005, Phil Hampton, Orlando FL.** Experience: 2,300 dives. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm and flat. Large rooms, king-size bed. The food was good, but not gourmet, and we never went hungry. This was our third live-aboard trip to Belize and this is the nicest of the 3 boats there. As boat this size swings a lot, you quickly learn not to chase the hang bar. The diving was great except the visibility was disappointing, 30-50 feet visibility, with a couple of 70-foot visibility dives. The Belize Zoo is worth the time and money. We went to the zoo after getting back to port Friday afternoon. The boat

crew recommended a taxi driver who knows the zoo. He knew all the animals and could point them out in their jungle habitat. The boat and diving rules were laid-back. We were treated as adults but were given any we requested. Captain Alan Cull and his crew were exceptional.

**Sun Dancer, June 2005, Phil Tobin (Philtobin6625@yahoo.com), Portland, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Our first experience with Peter Hughes, and it was leaps and bounds better than any of the live-aboards we have tried (AquaCat, Nekton, Aggressor) it's worth the few extra dollars. We saw more fish on the first dive than we saw all week in the northern Bahamas 4 weeks before this trip. The service was outstanding, the food was great, the ship was in wonderful condition, and the crew was eager to please. Plenty of room for all photo gear. Two separate large tables for all the photo equipment.

**Sun Dancer II, June 2005, Milton Provel (provel@msn.com), Manville, NJ.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 87 F, calm, no currents. I've done a live-aboard almost every year since 1987. This is the first boat I've been on that has king-size beds. This boat is great! Belize is a different story. There were dive boats all over the place. The dive sites we did were all over dived! They should look and learn from Bonaire! The Blue Hole is huge and an OK dive — the only place we saw sharks because other boats were feeding them. Beware the mosquitoes. This must be the mosquito capital of the world.

**Sun Dancer, July 2005, Bart Dahneke, Provo, UT.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, no currents. The owner's suite is the best deal. Biggest room, best accommodations, cheapest port hole instead of window. We went during kid's week. It was great. There were six kids from about six to nine. They had a great time and we enjoyed watching them (none of the kids were mine). I enjoyed being treated like an adult and being able to dive where and for however long (usually) I wanted. No reason to go back to the boat with air and film. Best crew I have ever seen.

**Sun Dancer II, September 2005, Tom Chase (trchase@msn.com), Prospect, KY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 F, calm. The Mercedes of live-aboard in terms of layout and accommodations. Very spacious cabins, huge AC salon, well laid out dive platform with great photography facilities. Since all divers had cameras (full trip of 20) it made a difference. The crew accommodated every request. Especially great were divemasters Elvis, Tori and Juan, Captain Andy, Engineer Ferdie and cabin hostess Elian. Food was good and plentiful but not spectacular. The best was always the homemade soup and bread served with lunch and dinner. The crew was conservation focused and gave outstanding briefings. Elvis (the resident comedian gave particularly enlightening and entertaining briefings). Also gave thorough and detailed safety briefings about the boat and abandon ship drill. Diving conditions were great. We dove Ambergris Caye, Lighthouse Reef and

Half Moon Caye. Did not go to the Blue Hole because of weather, but no one was all that disappointed with that decision. The reefs are healthy and contain tons of marine life. Sponges and corals are the big attractions. Lots of unique tropicals. The macro life on both day and night dives was spectacular. We saw a few turtles, some saw a manta ray and we all saw eagle rays. Not a great dive for the big stuff and sharks. No one saw a shark during the 26 possible dives (one night dive was scratched because of weather). Our cabin (owner's suite) was huge by liveboard standards and had a full bathroom with a regular sized shower and real bathroom facilities. This is the only guest cabin on this level and it smelled like diesel fuel all week. The captain said it was due a spill when they filled the tank and they tried to vent the area and use air freshener (which helped but didn't eliminate the problem). AC did not work properly the first night and it was fixed the next day. We did the cave tubing shore excursion at the end of the trip. It consumed about 5 hours and cost \$110. It was interesting and unique, but not worth the price. It was cool and refreshing. Fantastic trip. PH sets the standard with service and amenities (hot freshwater showers on dive deck followed by a hot towel and back massage. On night dives you were provided hot chocolate with optional rum. Moist towels and cold water while you waited at the airport etc.) Little things count and PH thinks about them all. UW Photography Comments: Had two well-equipped camera tables and on-board facilities. Excellent on-board photo staff.

**Sun Dancer II, September 2005, Julie Conner (snow\_julie@hotmail.com), Seabrook, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 86 to 88 F, calm. The boat was well run. We had 8 staff for 15 divers. We didn't go to the blue hole and had a couple of dives cancelled due to weather, but the overall experience was good. Most life was above 80 feet. Most of the boat was diving enriched air and we got our certification while on board. Lots of corals, we saw lots of small stuff. Not as many large groups of big fish as in Honduras or Bonaire. Food was excellent, the staff was good about remembering likes and dislikes. If you are thinking about certification and have health issues, get releases from physician before leaving home. It will save hassles. UW Photography Comments: No on board expert when we went, but lots of other divers willing to share experiences.

## CAYMAN ISLANDS

**Aggressor, May 2005 and August 2005, Lorna Weible (mweible@juno.com), Magnolia, TX.** Experience: 275 dives. Vis: 130 feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, Calm and flat. Top-flight crew on both trips. Captain willing to move boat at any time to find perfect conditions. We had water-ski conditions in August and some rain in May. Diving in Grand Cayman has taken a hit from Ivan. Lots of broken coral compared to several years ago. Bloody Bay Wall and Capt. Keith Tibbits are still sensational. Shore excursion to Little Cayman is interesting, and Terry is entertaining. This is for those who would like a mid-week

break from 5 dives/day. Excellent briefings. The crew really enjoys working together and they enjoy their jobs. The only negative would be the blood worms on the night dives Y at times they were so thick they would cloud out the light from your dive light.

**Aggressor, June 2005, Chris Goumas (chrisgoumas@yahoo.com), Brunswick, OH.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F., calm. This was my second time on this boat. The boat is nice although I kept finding flaking white paint on my clothes. Rooms are tight but clean w/TV/DVD combo. Diving made easy with Nitrox or air fills without you needing to remove BC from tank. Food was great. Nice variety, quality, and lots of it. Barty was the cook and she did a wonderful job. The dive staff was great but didn't point out anything underwater (except for the night dives). I wish I would have brought ear drops. make sure you have correctly fitting booties so you don't get blisters. I had my Dramamine so I didn't get sick on the crossing between Grand and Little Cayman. I had problems with Steve the photo guy as I rented a camera that didn't work (came up in middle of dive to get a different camera, when I went back down it still didn't work). He set up the camera (once it was working) and all my shots were way too dark, I think the flash was out of sync with the camera because some shots I took without the flash looked like those with the flash. He blamed me saying I was expecting perfection on each picture... give me a break. He did make sure I had a working camera for 4 dives though.