

Experience: 1,000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, currents. When a group is going, book through the parent company and take out insurance in case someone has to pull out of the group. Generally the diving is for experienced/advanced divers. All dives are moored so the boat swings quite a bit. Visibility was good and the seas cooperated though a storm formed near the Florida Keys. The food was excellent with good variety. A couple of the crew could use some, as we say in the Navy, extramilitary instruction, on how they respond to and treat their guest. We did have one handicapped diver who was given personal hands-on guided dives on the ones the Captain thought he could handle. Several opportunities to do short shore excursions in Saba, Statia and St. Kitts at only \$15 to \$25.

## TOBAGO

**Wind Dancer, August 2004, Lester Licht (chiroman@comcast.net), North Haven, CT.** Experience: 251-500 dives.

Vis: 50 to 120 Feet. Water: currents. With more than 350 logged dives and 15+ years of diving, I thought I was fairly experienced but I was quite the novice compared with my shipmates. That was good in that they allowed us a great deal of 'diving freedom' and bad for me because I hadn't been in the water for a year and a half and could have used more support from a reliable buddy. I was a solo traveler. It was my 1st live-aboard trip and he wake up-breakfast-dive-snack-dive-lunch-dive-snack-dive-dinner-night dive routine is a wonderful way to go. The group was friendly and congenial. Staff was excel-

lent from captain to DMs to cook etc. The warmed towels and hot chocolate with Baileys Irish Cream option was a fine touch. Cabins were more than adequate. They provided dive alerts and sausages on a reel. There was no instruction and when I decided, at 65 ft. to abort a dive I couldn't get the sausage inflated so I made a normal ascent with safety stop. Had I gotten the sausage inflated at depth I probably would have gotten bent because I had the reel hooked to my BC and was unprepared to let out the line safely. Now that I understand how the equipment should be used it wouldn't be a problem but it could have been bad news for me then. Even something as simple as a sausage and reel can be hazardous without the correct knowledge in how to use it properly. I remember reading about a DM who got bent using this same gear set up when the reel snagged and pulled him up instead of just letting the line run up to the surface. Peter Hughes joined us for most of the week. He's a fine host and a gentleman.

**Wind Dancer, November 2004, Timothy W. Smith (reefexplorers@sbcglobal.net), Richardson, TX.**

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 Fs. We knew the diving wouldn't be the best due to weather conditions, but we had an overall great experience. There is surge, current, and changing conditions that require a diver with experience. You must be comfortable controlling buoyancy, and entry on and off a tender in rough surface water. Trinidad was quite dirty, and overcrowded. I wish we had time to explore the nicer parts of the Island, but really only stayed

overnight on both ends of the trip for transfers. It looks like little America with KFCs and Pizza Huts everywhere. Tobago is a hidden gem, a place to escape time. We were picked up at the airport by Ray of Peter Hughes, and spent the day at the Hilton on Tobago as day guests. This is a nice hotel. It is on the Atlantic side of the coast, and gets a fair amount of wind, and waves along its private, and a secondary semi-private beach. The hotel food was reasonably priced, and good. The fruity drinks were given a thumbs up by Tisha, and I found the local Beer Carib to be tasty. There is a second beer called STAG that is the "Man's beer," but only had more alcohol content. The pool and services were great at the Hilton. Some international guests were unreceptive to locals, and Americans. On the *Wind Dancer*, the crew was professional and a blast. I ran into an employee that was on the *Sundancer I* when it was in Palau (now the *Star Dancer* in PNG). The Instructor Suzanne, and all the DMs: Tian, Tyson, Mr. Miller, and Motley (aka Mr. Handsome to the ladies) were professional and fun. The meals were typical 5 stars, and there was always plenty of entertainment from the crew and the guests on the boat. They have had much rain and mud slides on Tobago, so the dives close to shore were poor, but the dives away from the main shores were incredible. The Atlantic Side provided the most reef, and fish life I have ever seen in the Caribbean! The reefs are lush, vibrant, and covered in diverse marine life. I have never seen so many large fish, and in so much quantity. Similar to Belize for the reef,

and Cozumel for the large size of fish. The Caribbean side was more rocky, and deeper dives, but provided an incredible glimpse of game fish, and sharks. The dive through London Bridge was an incredible experience. Listening to the waves crashing overhead, and having the surge push you through this arched tunnel was awesome. We saw tons of Spotted Drums, Golden Eels, Angels, Trunkfish, Scorpion fish, and thousands of Creole Wrasses. It was not uncommon on the Caribbean side to see jack and barracuda chasing after them. Also on the trip, a Manta was seen from the surface, Dolphins off the bow of the boat, Sea Horses, and Hammerheads (unfortunately not my group). Captain Brian did the best he could to provide great diving for the group, and has a background in medical training, diving, and now working on his 500 ton license. He is worth to sit down and chat with. He went out of his way to make us feel like we were at home! When we docked back on Friday in Scarborough, Tom, Mary, Tisha, Craig, Marc, and I ventured into town. Craig and Marc found Pizza and an Internet Cafe. The rest of us found local shops and pubs to pass the time. I made many new friends at one of the mini-markets with a large quantity of Carib passed out. The prices were extremely affordable. Tenders have long overdue maintenance. The overall condition of the boat was good, but none of their boats that I have been on are as nice as the *Sun Dancer II* in Belize. We spent two full nights in port, which was disappointing. The rationale was to keep it calm for dinner, but I would

have rather steamed ahead to our destination earlier. The Wind Dancer could benefit from some stabilizers — this is not a boat for people who are looking for smooth calm water the whole trip. The benefit was good easy drift dives, and lush marine life. I used a Sea and Sea 3.1M total underwater Digital Camera with two Sea and Sea Auto Strobes for this trip. [http://pg.photos.yahoo.com/ph/timothy-waynesmith/my\\_photos](http://pg.photos.yahoo.com/ph/timothy-waynesmith/my_photos). There was ample space on board the Wind Dancer. Compressed air, towels, separate charging station, rinse tank. On the Tender there was a safe, secure place to store the equipment, but no fresh water on the Tender for rinsing photo gear.

**Wind Dancer, December 2004, Martha and Jeff Hubbard (hubbard182@att.net), Glenmont, NY.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, surge, currents. Wind Dancer is a pleasant ship — a lot more so if you have Cabin 1, with queen bed, instead of a lower-deck cabin with a double lower bunk and a head-bumping upper. There is a nice dive platform with big exit ladders, but you won't dive from it. (Pity — we had a great time on it 8 years ago.) All the diving is from two tenders, and regrettably, they're ordinary day-diving six-packs with uncomfortable seats, insecure tank racks, low freeboard and portable exit ladders put over the gunnel when someone wants to board. (Divers remembering the commodious jet-driven tenders of Sun Dancers in Palau will weep.) Since the rides to and from the dive sites are 10-15 minutes each, you spend 2-2.5 wet, bumpy and uncomfortable hours

a day on the tenders. Some divers complained that the dives were too close together (much of the surface interval is in the tenders) and that the number of dives should be reduced! When it was pointed out that doing every dive is not mandatory, that idea died. We dove Nitrox 32%. Fills nearly always >2950 psi, topped off on request. We rented a (backup) computer because of a threatened malfunction; no Nitrox-capable computers for rent! Dives are shallow enough and surface intervals long enough that neither air nor nitrox should put you in deco. There are some rough seas between the Caribbean and Atlantic, so pack your best seasickness remedy. Anchorages were pretty calm. Every dive is led, but the guides allow for photographers and other slow people. If you like diving on your own (with or without buddy), forget it. The diving, as Peter says, is like the Caribbean used to be. Great topography, corals, and small reef fish, and the biggest angelfish (French, queen, grey) and turtles we've ever seen. No groupers or other table-size fish — they've all been eaten. We did 22 dives of an available 24, average dive time 53 min. Most were 50-80 ft max, a few in the 95 ft range. Captain Eddie dealt with mechanical problems and the Whiners From Hell with equanimity. First mate Brian did diving, plumbing, photo, whatever, always cheerful. The local divemasters know the sites well and try to please everyone. And chef Yanis, familiar to PHD veterans, keeps the Belizean home cooking coming. Ray Sloper makes transfers to and from airport as painless as possible, and will take you to the Hilton — good place — or arrange an

interesting tour of the island on the last day. He makes you feel that you have a knowledgeable friend. BWIA must have the worst on-time record of any airline since the Iron Curtain came down, but they don't seem to have the miserable baggage attitude that TACA, ALM and c. have. Getting from Trinidad to and from Tobago seems pretty disorganized but worked o.k. UW photography: Rinse tank on Wave Dancer, none on tenders. Crew is careful. Divemaster CNN knowledgeable. No computer on ship for downloading (but room to use your own.) There is E-6 processing but nearly everyone was digital.

**Wind Dancer, February 2005, Bridget K Thomas (divingdocs@aol.com).**

Friendly staff, big animal action, macro life with mountainous and lush scenery is what the International Society of Aquatic Medicine group found. Exhilarating and critter-filled dives in both the Atlantic and Caribbean. Did a dive at Black Jack Hole that could rival the best dive ever in the Caribbean. The dive gave us blue water with large green morays out free swimming and stretched across the coral. Mating season for green morays, we were told, and the males were on the prowl. Mountainous volcanic terrain with exciting and varied marine life on a reef filled with colorful corals. The Sisters and Brothers Rock; from the topography of the area you had the feel of the Galapagos Islands. It was an exciting diving and provided sightings of hammerheads. Large Queen Angel fish and brain coral. Highlights were opportunities to dive with hammerheads, manta rays, jacks, turtles, scorpion, eels of varied species, French angels, rainbow

parrotfish, eagle rays, stingrays, nudibranchs, cherub fish, lettuce sea slugs, flamingo tongues, brain coral, purple vase sponges, varied colorful sponges, sea rods and sea plumes in a dive area with mountainous and volcanic underwater formations. Staff was exceptional. Yanis a wonderful cook. Warm towels with a shoulder massage after every dive. Service world class.

**Wind Dancer, February 2005, Tom Rain (tomrain1@hotmail.com),**

**Irving, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F., calm, no currents. Typical Peter Hughes live-aboard excellent operation. Very nice Caribbean diving. A nice, new dive location. Takes all day to fly there, though. Didn't see any big critters.

**Wind Dancer, March 2005, Jeff and Elaine Byland (jandeblyland@email.com),**

**Fremont, MI.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F., calm, choppy, surge, currents. All of the crew were hard working. The Wind Dancer was well kept for its age. Local divemasters made a big difference in the quality of the diving. We met divemaster Tyson 3 years ago on a land based Tobago trip and he was on the Wind Dancer. He continues to be one of our favorites. Divemaster CNN is a macro wizard! Motely made the strong current dives seem fun and relaxing. Captain Brian and the crew were top notch. We saw the largest angel fish and nurse sharks we had ever seen. Other sightings of interest were two 1 2 inch juvenile scorpionfish and a longhorn nudibranch that CNN found on a night dive, 3 blacktip reef sharks, several nurse sharks, several turtles, flamback

angelfish, cherubs, shortnose batfish, flying gurnards, juvenile queen angel (my first), juvenile French angels, huge lobsters and morays, crabs, many sting-rays, scorpionfish and a huge goliath grouper. We did not see hammerhead sharks, manta rays, spotted eagle rays, toadfish (heard them on night dives), seahorses, frogfish or juvenile gray angels. All of these are in the Tobago waters, but not sighted by us. American airlines just does not make it easy for you to get there (we used air miles). We had to do an overnight in Trinidad on the way there and an overnight in Miami coming back. We also had our underwater housing for our still digital camera stolen after our case was checked, so when we arrived late at night in Trinidad that was our welcome. All night dives are after dinner. We would prefer before dinner or a compromise and have it offered maybe twice a week. This is not a beginner destination due to some strong currents, panga diving, and at times low visibility. Bucket designated for cameras. Bucket on panga. All diving from pangas (not the rubber type pangas, but more like small boats). Some strong currents were encountered which always makes photography more challenging. Surface waves and getting back into a panga can also make handling of camera equipment more difficult at this dive location. There was a ladder for exiting the water. The panga driver and DM were careful with all of our equipment.

**Wind Dancer, May 2005, Edith and John Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 F,

calm. Our primary interest was video and still photography, yet the arrangement was for drift diving whereby we were expected to keep up with the group. Perhaps at times there is enough current to warrant drift diving, but during the two weeks I was there, there was not enough current to affect diving. During the first week my husband and I managed to do our own dives most of the time, but during the second week, after my husband left, I faced a problem because though I am a certified solo diver with my own redundant air supply and signed applicable waivers, I was told to drag a safety sausage throughout the dive. That would have been dangerous since it would have become entangled on the coral and would have interfered with my camera equipment. These factors were frustrating and unpleasant: bad weather, rain, poor light; terrible visibility on many dives, runoff from river; exhaustion from almost constant hard swimming to keep up; rapid use of air supply due to swimming complicated by the challenge of getting a full fill to 3000 psi; dive sites ranged from nice structure with plenty of coral and variety to devastated coral patches overturned from the hurricane, piles of junk and old tires and sediment-covered coral rubble; often the group drifted up over the reef in what current existed so that they were carried along and were kicking as well, while I, down closer to the reef to take the photos, was out of current and thus left behind. The dive director admonished me for a couple empty shells I picked up off the sand. She claimed that collecting shells violated the law of Tobago, export of shells

was prohibited, and having shells was punishable by fine. She announced that the Peter Hughes policy forbade picking up anything from the sea. There is no such Tobago law and the written Peter Hughes preservation of nature clause restricts the taking of "any live animal, shellfish, fish, coral..." There is nothing about seashells. UW Photography Comments: Camera table on dive deck was adequate with air pressure supplied and rinse buckets. But, dive policies were not photo-friendly in that rushing divers down the reef was not conducive to photographic activity.

**Wind Dancer, July 2005, Joe Alper and Michele Pelanne (741stuff@comcast.net), Louisville, CO.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Great, challenging diving on a healthy reef system surrounding Tobago. We spent the first two days on the Caribbean side, where the visibility was good and the current was mild. We saw several batfish, and so many critters that our slates were full by the time we came to the surface. The Atlantic side was breathtaking, both for its beauty and the 5-finger diving. We more octopuses out during the day, turtles galore and schools of tarpon. Crabs of all sizes and shapes, nudis, fingerprint cyclomas, yellow garden eels, a southern stingray the size of a manta, and waters thick with angels. The divemasters, Motley and Tyson, were outstanding. Not only did they know the reef, but they were truly interested in talking about what we'd seen. The Wind Dancer is not the most stable boat in the world in the choppy waters, so the boat rocked and rolled all night long, even in the "protected"

harbors. Thank goodness, there were NO photographers on the boat

**Wind Dancer, August 2005, John Critchfield, Seattle, WA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, choppy, currents. BWIA departed three hours late from Miami. We got to Port of Spain, Trinidad, at midnight. But, the flight did not continue to Tobago as scheduled. I was stranded, along with two other divers. Wind Dancer sailed from Tobago without us. Peter Hughes' onshore representative was on top of the situation and we could talk by borrowed cell phone. We caught a flight the next morning, and we were met curbside with cool towelettes and cold drinks. We took a 12 hour journey by van along the narrow, winding, scenic road to Speyside and were on board Wind Dancer by lunch. Boat operations were well-organized and functioned close to schedule, with up to five dives per day. Divemasters demonstrated expert knowledge of sites and conditions. Pay attention to the briefings, especially regarding strong currents and procedures for diving from the tenders. All dives were drift dives along coral reefs and rock ledges, except at one wreck. Diving conditions were variable in visibility, current and bottom features. Even in relatively poor visibility, there was plenty to see. The corals are beautiful and healthy. The tropical fish population is diverse and thriving. We encountered hawksbill turtles, nurse sharks, tarpon, barracuda, moray eels (green, spotted and golden), sharp-nosed eels and stingrays. We found sea horses, large crabs, lobsters, squid, spotted drums, jaw fish with eggs and bat fish.

Accommodations were generally comfortable and the layout was convenient. Some fixtures and furnishings were a little worn. There were no thermostats in the cabins and some were reportedly too warm. The crew was friendly, attentive and kept everyone informed. Everyone seemed to enjoy the food and dinners were elegantly presented. There were a fish identification slide show and a comical fashion show with guest participation.

## TURKS AND CAICOS

**Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, November 2004, Rickie Sterne/Chrisanda Button (rickandchris@alltel.net), Elkins, AR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. The diving off uninhabited French Cay and West Caicos is some of the best Caribbean diving we have done. The walls of NW Provo were beautiful, but the shallows were sand-choked with some algal growth. Hard corals, octocorals, and sponges were in good condition and profuse along the walls and over the shallows. We saw one or two reef sharks on almost every dive. A single eagle ray soared along the wall at G Spot. Stingrays were common on the sandy areas at the tops of the walls. T&C seem to be unusually well supplied with queen triggerfish, cowfish, and indigo hamlets. There were two remarkable turtle encounters. On a late afternoon dive we watched what we believed to be a courtship dance between two white spotted filefish. Night dives brought out many crustaceans. We saw a number of speckled morays and an acre or so of garden eels. Night dives

were especially enjoyable. The T&C Aggressor II is a beautifully appointed two-year-old boat. Piers has captained the Aggressor boats in the Turks and Caicos for a decade, and he runs a smooth operation. The cabins are small, of course, but they are well organized and comfortable. The fluffy terrycloth robes helped compensate for the usual too-cold air conditioning. The large sundeck, half open and half covered, features a wet bar offering water, juices, sodas, beer, and wine. Most divers dozed away their surface intervals here. The dive deck on this boat is hands down the best we have encountered on any live-aboard. Large gear stations and easy tank fills of air and nitrox start each dive well. Getting back on board is exceptionally easy via the stable ladders with well-placed rungs. Two warm showers and warm towels were great après-dive. Not to mention the hot cocoa after night dives. The crew was superb. They acted as if they really enjoyed their jobs and cared that we were enjoying our vacation. When the hairdryer in our cabin malfunctioned, one of the crew members lent me his for the week. Chef Bob kept great meals and snacks pouring out of his tiny galley, and accommodated both picky eaters and people with dietary restrictions (not to mention those of us who get hungry when diving). Annette at the Aggressor office on Provo and Joe, the Aggressor's taxi driver, were extremely helpful when our luggage was delayed. The Aggressor home office in Louisiana was unhelpful. Our usual travel agent, Tony Smith, died after we booked the trip. His files were picked up by Caradonna Caribbean Travel. But the