

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

Louisiana folks somehow forgot that they had received all sorts of information about us and money from the new agent. They were sending letters to a defunct agency asking for more money. Cami at Caradonna was great, however. Christopher, the photo pro, was not just a guy who operated the E6 processing machine. He'll be in the next generation of famous underwater photographers. The boat offered a computer with big screen TV for digital photographers. With all 11 photographers onboard shooting digital, there was some competition for the charging station.

**Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, January/February 2005, Bill Schlegel (Schleggg@aol.com), Jefferson City, MO.** Experience: > 700 dives.

Water: 74-76 F. Choppy to dead calm. Air temps: high 60s to 80. Two week special where customers can book the last week of the season for Turks and Caicos itinerary and then stay on board for the Silver Banks, 120 miles north of the Dominican Republic, for the first week of their winter humpback whale excursions. This 120-foot ship is relatively new, believe it was built in March '03 and just had an interior re-do in December '04. New carpets, cedar lined closets, new woodwork and interior decorations and new paint all. Unlimited hot water (well, almost), air conditioning that works with satellite internet/e-mail for a small fee, in room safes (don't really know why one would need this), and small DVD players in every room. E-6 processing and digital processing for many cameras. Open bar, nice camera table setup, all cylinders are filled at your gear spot where there are lockers for any wet gear. Also the

dive platform is just about perfect. The crew were: Captain Piers, second captain James, Video pro Julie, Photo pro Amanda and Christopher an excellent chef, photo pro and occasional dive guide. Dive rules? All the common sense you've been taught and come back to the boat with 500 psi in your cylinder. Piers when he announced during a dive briefing, that some of the divers were not coming back to the boat with 500 psi. Of course he could tell when he hooked up the filling whip to the bottle and the gauge momentarily dropped to 200 psi as the valve was turned on. Upon climbing up on the back dive platform after a dive, many times one was presented with fresh baked goodies, followed by a hot shower on the dive platform. Typical rooms had a queen sized lower bed and a twin sized upper, with a small closet, sink and compact combination head and shower. These rooms could hold a family of three but it would be crowded. Maid service, with your beds being made every morning while you were diving and laundry service if you asked. Very nice main dining room with breakfast and lunch being cafeteria style but all dinners were served at your table with great desserts. Meals were great. Captain Piers van der Walt would present one of his dive photo shows or one of the girls would do theirs. The upper deck is a hot tub, bar and sun deck. The rooms are a little small by cruise ship standards (but not by live-aboard standards). About 30 square feet of standing room. First week dived the usual sites on West Caicos walls, French Caye walls, South Caicos and Long Caye the go over to Grand Turk for their beauti-

ful walls at the end of the first week. West Caicos wall is perfect and not too heavily dived, although it is in the reach of the day boats out of Providenciales in calm weather. Visibility 100 feet or more. Plethora of usual Caribbean/SW Atlantic reef fishes. Saw turtles and rays commonly. Very nice macro subjects. French Caye was notable for several, friendly reef sharks that circled us on every dive and were always under the boat with a large school of horse eyed jacks. One 4 foot shark even "bumped" me when I was on the hang bar. I terminated the dive fairly quickly thereafter. Saw several more turtles and lots of pelagics at French Caye. South Caicos was notable for turtles and macro subjects. Long Caye revealed that there really were eagle rays at eagle ray pass. Piers knew just when the eagle rays would be there, based on the tide and when they would be moving through this area to get to the shallows to feed. It was a treat to have a "fly by" from two bottle nosed dolphins. Total encounter was 3-4 minutes. Airplane wreck off Long Caye. Nice dive in a twin engine turboprop that didn't make the approach to the small airstrip at South Caicos quite right. It was full of critters such as large green morays and large Caribbean reef crabs under the wings. The crossing to Grand Turk Island was at night and little rough for the landlubbers. This was the only time people on board went for the Dramamine. Grand Turk is justifiably famous for its walls. The beach off the Chief Ministers House is perfect white sand that terminates in a reef that rises about 10-15 feet above the sand and then drops to the abyss. It is covered with large schools of reef fish, including a red

lipped batfish. They are not supposed to be here. Moved to the Silver Banks, a 45-mile by 10 mile shallow area with sand bottom and hundreds of shallow reefs in the Atlantic Ocean about 120 miles SE of Grand Turk. It was named because of a Spanish Galleon that tried to pave it with pieces of eight after ripping its bottom out here in the 1600. Atlantic Humpback Whale herd go in the winter to have its babies and breed. Guaranteed that you can get in the water with whales and have multiple close encounters. The NOAA. research vessel that was there told us there were 4000-5000 whales in the area. We saw dozens of breeches, probably hundreds. We saw "rowdy" males jostling for position with females while pushing other males out of the way. Tail slaps and pectoral fin slaps were everywhere. A sleeper of "logger" meant that we could slip into the water and approach closely and have a real close encounter. Captain Piers, after 90 trips to the Silver Banks over ten years and helping the DR set up the rules for the encounters, knows as much about whale behavior as any man alive. Best time to go to is late February or March. Most of the babies were about 2 weeks old (10 feet long at birth and grow 1 inch a day. Adults are 1 ton per foot on the average and 50 feet or more long. Some humpbacks have been 65 feet)and the mothers were keeping them away from the divers. Piers says that later in the season the mothers will push the babies toward divers sometimes. American, most other major Caribbean carriers fly out of Playa Plata which has a nice airport.

**Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, July 2005, Janet Czapski (info@divetravel**

**services.com), Farmington Hills, MI.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy, surge. This is a great boat for beginners/advanced divers. The crew is first-rate and love their jobs and get along well with one another. The whole operation just hums along with everyone having a grand time! Dave, our chef, was probably the best live-aboard chef we've encountered. His food was fabulous and varied. He accommodated dietary/taste restrictions without a glitch. Snacks and desserts were yummy also! Cabins on this boat are beautiful except the quad cabin that is incredibly small. The two women sharing it during our week both said they'd pay the additional money the next time for a double cabin instead. The master cabin with its marble bath and queen bed is dreamy! Storage is ample in the cabins with closets/drawers and under-bunk storage. French Cay is known for its friendly resident reef shark population and we weren't disappointed. Several saw mantas on two occasions and turtles were on most dives. Soft corals and sponges are magnificent and the barrel sponges were spawning during our trip. Grouper are large, friendly and photogenic! Cleaning stations abound on all the dive sites. Visibility at the beginning of the week was excellent; Hurricane Dennis affected the vis toward the end of our week. Two huge ladders accommodate returning divers. There is a stationery hang bar below the boat for safety stops along with air hoses for those running low. The two showers on the dive deck were high-pressured and hot. Masks/fins are

stored on racks on the dive deck. Air fills were either air or pretty much spot-on 32% Nitrox for all fills and were 3000 psi consistently. Dive guides were available for guided dives but you were free to dive your own profile. Large camera table on dive deck with shelves below for additional storage. Big camera rinse tank with frequent water changes. Crew all handle cameras as if they were their own. Capt. Piers made sure that all photographers have equipment to use if their own equipment fails for some reason (no charge)! He also encourages and instructs on photo techniques with humor and patience.

**Turks and Caicos Aggressor, September 2005, Jay Newby (yebo@comcast.net), Huntsville, AL.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. Did back to back charters. The first week I was in an intense underwater photo workshop with Maricio Handler and Raoul Touzon, two National Geographic Photographers who are great photo instructors. The workshop is designed for housed SLR camera systems. We had 10 digital and 2 film participants. Each morning begins with a lecture after breakfast, diving all day and one night dive and open critique of our work at 10 pm each evening. It was amazing to see how everyone's work dramatically improved over the week. We shot wide angle, macro and splits and (those shooting digital) we did our editing and post production. Mauricio's website is [www.handlerphoto.com](http://www.handlerphoto.com). I shoot a Nikon D70 with an Aquatica housing, TLC arms and two Ikelight DS125 strobes. I stayed an extra week to apply and my

shooting got better. The boat is owned and captained by Piers VanderWalt and he has a great crew. The boat is well laid out and has ample room on the dive deck for divers and shutterbugs. They have a large camera table to handle lots of cameras and video. The diving is great for the Caribbean, every dive is a wall dive, some quite dramatic. The health of the reef is great though a few dive sites had algae on it. Reef sharks on every dive, as well as frequent sightings of large groupers, turtles and eagle rays and southern sting rays. We had no bad weather, though we got caught up in Hurricane Katrina when it hit Miami and it took us an extra two days to get there. We arrived on Saturday, without any baggage. The crew loaned us all the dive equipment my wife and I needed, I bought a swimsuit on board and my wife was loaned one so we didn't on loose any diving. The crew and their land-based taxi driver Joe did a great job in locating and getting our bags to Provo on Monday morning. Aquatica had loaned a D70 camera and housing to the boat so I was able to shoot on a system I was familiar with. The air conditioning kept our room freezing most of the time, we usually kept of vent taped with duct tape. The galley was often cold. We were on the boat last year and it seems to be an ongoing problem. The food was average (also like last year) and I expect a higher quality from an Aggressor. Comparing the food to the Kona Aggressor, which we were on in July, I would say the food is actually poor. There was little variety. The fish was frozen, not fresh as you might expect in a place like Provo where there are lots of fishing boats in the marina.

There was little to snack on other than chips and granola bars and the served morning and afternoon snacks were usually greasy or sugary. Our room often had sewer smell coming out of the shower drain, which we were able to fix by keeping the ventilation fan on. Overall, good diving and a caring crew.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer, October 2004, Walter Brenner (waltbrenner@yahoo.com), Wayne, PA.** Experience: 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 ft. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm & flat, no currents. Except for a surly, unfriendly, arrogant cook, this was a wonderful trip. Because of his attitude night dives were scheduled after dinner so few of the passengers did them. I have been on 20 live-aboards and this trip measured up to the best. The boat was thoroughly shipshape, looking completely new. The crew was friendly and helpful in every way. The cabins were not large but adequate. Food was excellent. At the time of year— after hurricane season and before winter winds— more remote dive sites like French Cay and West Caicos were dived. Briefings were thorough and diving profiles were left to each diver. Many sharks and turtles and healthy reefs. Overall, quite good diving by Caribbean standards.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer II, February 2005, Bob and Carolyn Smith, Swansea, MA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F., calm, choppy, surge, no currents. We had trouble finding the boat, despite an email from the main office two days before with a last minute change of location and an erroneous phone number. They were anchored

in a large cove, alongside the old Caribbean Explorer, destined for the Bahamas. The crew brought the dinghy over to collect our luggage, and Brian, the engineer, kindly drove us over to Turtle Cove so we could have lunch and wait in the shade until Herbert came to pick us up. The boat is beautiful, well appointed and nice layout, with roomy state rooms and private ensuite heads with showers. The dive deck is aft of the salon. There is an ample camera table and large camera tank, which was a bit too deep. The dive deck is a few steps down, and there is a place to sit to put on fins and mask. The dive platform is low to the water, making an easy entry, and the ladders are sturdy and easy to climb. Two lines hung off the boat for safety stops. They provided quite a ride when the boat swung around due to wind and/or current. As it was only in its third week of service, the crew was sometimes discovering problems that affected the passengers, but nothing that couldn't be fixed. The crew was short-staffed by one person, and ended up short by two when Brian became seriously ill with a bad infection that required us to motor back from West Cay so he could be hospitalized. Captain JF is a knowledgeable and personable captain who did his best to provide us with the best diving possible, but the weather did not work in his favor. This boat swings quite a bit when it is breezy, causing some ascents and safety stops to be challenging. JF anchored a couple of times, once with disastrous consequences for some huge corals. Apparently he discovered the anchor chain on this boat lays down in the sand more than the old boat did. The dive sites ranged from OK to terrific. The walls

are spectacular in their drop-offs. We saw lobsters, crabs, eagle rays, plenty of sharks, turtles, and moray eels, lots of queen angels, queen triggers, and all the beautiful tropicals, and a great variety of soft and hard corals. Water ranged from 75 to 77 degrees. Our 3 ml. full suits were perfect. There were surface currents but only a couple of dives with noticeable current below. Viz was about 70 feet on average, greater over the wall, less in the sandy areas. Some of our most interesting dives were in the shallows—especially when we poked our heads into a cavern and came eye to eye with a nurse shark that we became frightened, and in turn frightened us when he charged between us to get away! Stanley prepared delicious meals and snacks from scratch every day. The rest of the crew, Julie, Graham and Mike worked diligently to keep things moving smoothly. UW Photography Comments: Large table and rinse tank, towels provided for cameras.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer II, May 2005, Donald Hoft, Holliston, MA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, choppy. Caribbean Explorer II is an excellent new boat, well maintained and comfortable. Good weather and the Captain, JF, took advantage. We did West Caicos, French Key and could get to West Sand Spit for many dives. French Key/West Spit are not always accessible, being remote and unprotected. We did a few "no name" exploratory live boat dives at Sand Spit. This was an excellent trip, the diving, the crew, the boat, food, and the guests all were a huge plus. Corals, sponges, fish life, were all healthy and in abundance; octopus,

sharks, eagle rays, morays and lots of “macro” life on many dives. I did the Solo Diving Certification on this trip—it didn’t get in the way of overall diving schedule. Boat crew had excellent skills and contributed greatly to efforts of divers. They did one of the best videos I’ve seen and did an excellent stills CD.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer II, June 2005, Michael Stanfield, Grandview, MO.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Room number two on the upper deck was adequate but overpriced compared with the standard rooms. I would not pay the additional price for the deluxe room if I were booking another trip. The boat was clean and well organized. There was adequate room and chairs on the sun deck for relaxing. Desserts between dives met my high standards. The crew from the captain to cook to engineer had the same enthusiasm on the last day of the trip as on the first day. They honored all customer requests. If a diver asked to have their tank topped off it was done immediately. I have been on other boats where the crew would ask “how much is in the tank” and then wanted to dispute the accuracy of the customer’s gauges. The dive guides in the water let divers go at their own speed versus an attitude of “follow me.” There were a number of special fees and taxes when the final bill was figured. I am sure they were all disclosed in the fine print but I would have preferred to have been given one total price for the trip and not add-ons at the final billing. I was disappointed with overall condition of coral and fish life. I dive Bonaire at least four times a year so my expectations may be high.

UW Photography Comments: Boat had large table for camera and large rinse tank that accommodate everyone’s cameras without fear of any damage. Special towels were kept on camera table dedicated only for drying cameras.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer, June 2005, Dmitry Pasikhov (dpasikhov@msn.com), Fontana, WI.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, no currents. Second time with Explorer Fleet (Caribbean Explorer in 2004). Diving at West Caicos was pretty good with lots of tropicals, some gray reef sharks, nurse sharks and lots of large groupers. All night dives had lobsters, crabs, octopus and some sharks. A manta was dancing in the shallow while we were watching from below. French Cay’s diving more of the same with gray sharks and lots of spotted morays. At West Sand Spit visibility was not the greatest but abundant oceanic and queen trigger fishes and Atlantic spade fish. healthy corral. Divemasters Angelie, Mike and Nath were great, patient and helpful. Spent a dive with Nath hunting for a pipe horse until finally found one. Food was good and plentiful. Eggs, pancakes for breakfast, snacks between dives, good variety for lunch and dinner. All dietary restrictions were granted (two vegetarians, two non-pork eating Jews, and two divers allergic to everything). Video of the trip was available and professionally done by Jenny. Ian was a great captain with his dry British sense of humor. Reservations for the trip were fast and painless. UW Photography Comments: Nice camera table and charging station, convenient and dry. Good photographic instruction, photo

lab available, but no one used 35mm film. TV and connectors available for viewing of video.

**Turks and Caicos Explorer II, August 2005, Ron & Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.** Experience: 361 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy, currents. Second trip with Explorer Ventures (did Saba, Statia, St. Kitts last year). These live-boards are well organized, great food, and great staff. Went to lots of sites around the islands and saw sharks on almost every dive. Lots of large grouper, big lobsters, and divemasters pointed out lots of small critters. Best dive site was West Sand Spit, remote and pristine coral, and lots of large sea life. Spotted eagle rays, large turtles, big sharks and friendly big groupers. Night dives were excellent with lots to see.

## UNITED STATES

### Florida

**Ultimate Getaway, April 2005, John Hardison (j.hardison@verizon.net), Rockville, MD.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 72 to 74 F., choppy. Took a group of 9 divers on a 3 night live aboard to the Dry Tortugas (Gulf of Mexico). Total of 16 divers on board and 7 crew. Water was choppy, windy, some current on the surface. Boat rolled a lot because of weather and we had some seasickness. Offered four dives on day 1 and six on day 2. Advertised 7-10 dives per day. Third day advertised 2 special dives, but weather was poor and we made for port. Repeat divers said other trips had many more dives, calm seas. I have

dove in worse conditions (Atlantic) and would have dove every time they stopped the boat. Boat did a lot of puttering around same area without stopping. We think they were looking for good spots, but no communication ever to divers as to schedule, conditions, or what they were trying to do. Crew never entered water as guides or dove. Upon arrival at dock, crew helpful and took all luggage aboard. Upon return, divers did all the work. Nitrox \$40 for unlimited refills (just wish we had more opportunities to refill). John, the cook, personable and food was good. Al, the tank refiller, always had a joke to tell and paid close attention to cameras and getting tanks refilled. Other crew were invisible for the most part, helped grab cameras and fins when coming aboard, but that was it. Advertised 14' chase boat conspicuously absent from trip, it would have been helpful to get current-swept divers back on board. Community bunk room— no frills, and bunks were actually roomier than anticipated. On first dives, divers were told to swim to bow and descend on anchor line, but current was too strong. When divers complained to Captain Rick, resistance was met and he became defensive — not what you want when trying to work out a solution. Although his communication and customer service skills lacked, diving improved dramatically after discussion, with lines attached from stern to bow. We think we caught the crew at a bad time, some members were new, and the weather report may have had some of them thinking they would not be working that weekend because they did not seem “in to it” at all. Diving was good all around, always