

passenger boarding at Salt Cay for the return flight. Tradewinds has 5 rooms, some with full kitchen, and some with kitchenette. All have a screen-in porch facing the beach. Water is potable, and I refilled bottles of water to place in my freezer so I'd always have a cold drink on hand. The rooms are simple, but clean and comfortable, and bicycles are available for your touring pleasure. The dive shop is a short walk down the road, and it's easy to return to your room between the 9:00am and 11:00am dives. The afternoon dive, which was scheduled for 3:00pm, allowed plenty of time for lunch and a leisurely siesta in a hammock. Depending on the wishes of the divers, a night dive can be substituted for the afternoon dive. Dining at Island Thyme Bistro was an unexpected pleasure, as proprietor Porter Williams has created an oasis of good taste and warm island hospitality. The food was outstanding and graciously served, and the choices varied. I also sampled Pat's Place and Mount Pleasant Guest House. In every case, the welcome was genuine and the food prepared with care. Reservations must be made in advance at all the restaurants, as on this small island, no one cooks on speculation. I'd simply make my breakfast plans at dinner, lunch plans at breakfast, and dinner plans at lunch — which allowed me to choose the entrée for my next meal. At Island Thyme, I was able to run a tab for the week.

UNITED STATES

Florida – Boca Raton

Force-E, Diversity, October 2004, Mar-

sha Stout (astrl@cfl.rr.com), Cocoa, FL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 to 81 F, choppy, surge. Force-E will schedule you with one of several dive boats according to the type of dive you want to do (wreck, reef, depth, night dive, etc). Nitrox and rental equipment available. I went out on the Diversity with Captain Tony. The dive master stayed on the boat to help with entries and exits and everyone was paired with a buddy. Water and packaged fruit drinks were provided. With the boat at full capacity (15 divers) it was a little crowded. We dove the Sea Emperor (Sea Empress) with a max depth of 71 feet and then Boca Trench with a max depth of 65 feet. At the wreck, there were a couple of attentive stingrays and even a nurse shark in the sand. The wreck itself is upside down as it flipped during sinking. You can penetrate the wreck through some open areas in the top (hull). The reef was healthy and had some ledges for lobster, crabs and moray eels to hide in. We saw another stingray swimming around in the sandy area to the west. The crew of the boat were friendly and helpful. No on-board rinse bucket — brought my own. DM was happy to hand me my camera after entry.

Islamorada

Islander, Keys Divers, August 2005, Ben Glick (bglick@vgnernet.net), Williamstown, MA. Experience: 1500 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: 86 to 87 F, calm and flat to choppy. Both dive shops good with nice boats. Dive on Eagle wreck was excellent with good visibility and no current. Other dives were shallow with occasional interest.

Hugh free-swimming green moray, 3-4 ft. moray under ledge, nurse sharks one day. The Islander was excellent. Nice rooms with kitchens. Good value. Try Lazy Days and Island Grill for dinner.

Key Largo

Amoray, September 2005, Lisa Strickland (strickland207@insightbb.com), Washington, IL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 5 to 35 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, surge, currents. We arrived the day after Hurricane Rita, so we missed one day of diving due to waves and current. The next day current several of us had to swim against the current to get back to the boat as the current swept us past the boat. The dive boat does not have a tender. Hang onto a mooring ball and after everyone else is aboard, they come and get you. Some sites had limited vis, as little as 5 ft. At most, we had 35 ft. The Spiegel Grove had no current. Majority of divers voted to do two dives on the SG instead of changing to a shallower dive that risked current, surge and/or decreased vis. They do the SG twice a week. Night dives are twice a week on the Benwood. Rinse tub for gear at rental locker. Gear locker available for those staying at resort. Needs more hangers and hooks. Accommodations vary. My room was like a suite with an extra room and a large bathroom. Small refrigerator and microwave, table and chairs Continental breakfast: bagels and a toaster, jellies, peanut butter, OJ and coffee. Winn Dixie about a mile down the road for groceries. Dinners at assorted area restaurants. Grills on site for guests to use. 3 kayaks available for guests for no charge. Nice pool. When

there was a problem with my room, Kat came out at midnight and gave us a different room to sleep in. Rooms were maintained well.

Amy Slate's Amoray Inn, November 2004, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com), Golden Valley, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 F, choppy. The reefs in Florida seem pale green and colorless. Agricultural and urban run off in south Florida is affecting the coral, and the degree of algae in the water, as is claimed by some. The prices for diving and accommodations in Florida are quite high, and the diving is mediocre. Even when we are trying to accommodate beginners in our group, I doubt our club will return to the Key Largo area. Rates Amoray hovered near \$300 per night for six. This resort is pleasant appearing, and the front office staff was accommodating and friendly. The dive boat staff are a bit gruff and distant. One of the boat captains appeared to be in the process of resigning, and was debating this issue in a fairly stern fashion with his supervisor. Little to no choice of sites given to divers, any question regarding destination is answered with "We'll see when we get out there". In their defense, it's probably true that local conditions fluctuate in the winter in the upper keys, however, I noted that getting back to the dock on time for the next scheduled dive was a active concern of the captains, and may have influenced their dive site selection. We dove the same spot on consecutive days, and the captain just shrugged when this was mentioned. The Amoray Diver is a large boat that's filled with beginners on the weekends, and is

pleasantly uncrowded weekdays in the winter. The boat is fast and modern, but can get crowded. There are five exit points on the boat, so entry and return are convenient, even when full. Weather in the keys is unreliable between October and March, any advanced purchase of dive trip packages is a considerable gamble. Diving can be washed out for a week at a time with a prolonged northern cold front and the resultant winds. This resort does not have an outdoor hot tub, which is a shame, since it's too cool in the winter to use the pool in the late afternoon and evening. Hobo's has the best food in Key Largo, and it's right next to Amoray Inn. The Amoray staff was not willing to refund our payment when we chose to leave to Mexico a day earlier than our scheduled departure. They did give us a one night credit to use in the future.

HMS Minnow, February 2005, Gregg Gaylord (gregg1954@aol.com), Sheboygan, WI. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 12 to 50 Feet. Water: 70 to 73 F., calm. The HMS Minnow is a six pack that leaves from the 100 mile marker in back of the Holiday Inn at Key Largo. We were greeted at the dock by the friendly Captain Jeff Jarvis and his wife Betty at the appointed time. We received Nitrox for two-tank/day dives for 4 days. He helped us load our gear. The Nitrox fills were all 31.3-32%, and over 3000psi. The boat was clean with limited but ample fresh water and had a forward cabin that was small but also ample to keep us out of the wind during the 30 minute trip to the dive sites. No heads on this boat, but it was well equipped and smartly set up for divers with a center dive bench to strap

in our tanks. We dove the Spiegel Grove twice, Turtle Ledge, Snapper Ledge, French Reef, Molasses, and The Duane. The day we dove the Duane, we were the only two divers and Jeff allowed us to do both of our dives at this site. The Duane was seated upright in about 125 at the sand and there was a "resident" school of about 100 barracuda. A Spanish hogfish was occupied at a cleaning a school of about 25 Blue Runners. There was no current. The Spiegel Grove was somewhat barren of fish life, but the massive props and shafts made it worth the trip.. The reef dives were typical shallow Keys reef dives with lush corals, large schools of a large variety of tropicals, occasional turtles including a massive loggerhead, a few nurse sharks and rays, and beautiful soft corals (though the coral at Looe Key were more abundant and in better shape). The water temp was too cold for our 5mm suits and we added beanies, hooded vests, gloves, boots and still managed to shiver twenty minutes into our second dive until we added a 2mm neoprene vest. The Captain gave brief but satisfactory dive plans but we were "on our own" in the water as he didn't dive and didn't carry a crew. A dive guide could be arranged upon request. I don't recall hearing a "time limit" for a dive. All of the dives were within recreational limits for our Nitrox. They have no shop. Contact Jeff Jarvis at 800-366-9301. local 305-451-7834, or www.hmsminnow.com.

HMS Minnow, June 2005, David Lindaman (dwlindaman@sbcglobal.net), Kansas City, MO. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy, surge. This is the sixth year in

a row that I have dived with the HMS Minnow. Capt. Jeff Jarvis and his wife Betty run the nicest little six pack dive boat you could ask for. He has first aid and oxygen onboard, his electronics are up to date, his boat is in good shape, his motor is new and his aluminum 80s always have a good fill. The boat has a large canvas top that gives plenty of shade and a great tank bench in the center of the boat with room for six divers to gear up. You enter the water with a back roll, you exit the water via a fin ladder where Jeff will be waiting to take your tank and BC. This is not a spacious boat, there is no head or large camera table, but there are camera rinse buckets and a fresh water hose for rinsing equipment and divers. Jeff leaves the dock 30 minutes before most other boats and can usually get you to the site before the best mooring balls are gone. He is safety oriented and will not take you out or charge you if conditions would put you at risk or make your dive unenjoyable. He works hard to get you to the sites you want, first to book usually get to choose. He will coordinate instruction through a local dive master if you desire it and he only uses dependable, quality instructors. He can also help you arrange accommodations. He is docked at the Holiday Inn — walk out of your room and onto the boat. He has good rental gear. His prices are no more than the big boats and you get personal service. Be prepared to enjoy Jeff's dry sense of humor and exchange of tall tales. Even with the vis down due to a tropical storm moving through days before we arrived, Jeff got us to sites with decent enough vis while many big boats were dropping divers

in near zero vis. We never had less than 20 and often Jeff could find us 50 to 60 feet of vis. Jeff will do night dives if you ask early and he can get a full boat. If you think I am overselling, just look at past editions of the Chapbook and you will see that others share my opinion. Check out Jeff's web site www.hmsminnow.com or e-mail him at hmsminnow@email.msn.com or call him at 800-366-9301.

HMS Minnow, June 2005, Gary Cowden, Kansas City, MO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 20 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, choppy. I have taken 7, 1-week dive trips to Key Largo with the HMS Minnow. Jeff Jarvis is the owner/captain of the HMS Minnow, a "six pack" boat with a single outboard motor. The HMS Minnow takes a maximum of 6 divers, and berths in the canal by the Holiday Inn on the east side of Hwy 1. In July, my friend and I arrived in Key Largo on the heels of Tropical Storm Arlene. Due to Arlene's influence, on our first day of diving we experienced windy weather, unusually heavy seas, and limited visibility. The weather, waves, and visibility gradually improved as the week progressed, but the visibility never exceeded 50 feet, below average for the Key Largo area. In August, I returned with my family, who also are divers. Water temperatures were in the mid-80s and visibility ranged from 30 to 75 feet. On both trips the reefs looked healthy and the fish life was plentiful. We had several sightings of spotted eagle rays, turtles, green moray eels, and spotted eels, as well as numerous nurse sharks. Our favorite dive sites were Snapper Ledge, Conch Wall and Reef, and the Span-

ish Anchor site on Molasses Reef. Jeff's boat is well maintained (thanks to Betty, his First Mate) and comfortable for the 6 or fewer divers he takes. Jeff has a friendly and relaxed attitude while still being keenly aware of what's going on with his divers and their equipment. Jeff is helpful without being overbearing. Jeff gives clear, informative pre-dive briefings, making use of maps of the dive sites. Jeff stays with the boat during the dives rather than entering the water, so divers should be reasonably competent at underwater navigation or Jeff can arrange for a dive instructor or guide to dive with you.

Horizon Divers, February 2005, Mort Rolleston, Arlington, VA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 75 F, choppy. I was pleasantly surprised at the diving at Key Largo. Key Largo had huge schools of fish in open water (and I like my fish — especially larger pelagics, which Bonaire totally lacked as did Nassau except for the great shark dive I did there). The bait balls (of what I assume are silver-sides) near Spiegel Grove wreck had to have contained millions of fish in tight formations that were more than 100 feet in diameter being dined upon by charging jacks, barracuda, and grouper. There were also large schools of grunts, goatfish, and schoolmasters at most sites. We also saw several nurse sharks, a huge manta ray, a spotted moray, a huge jewfish, regular grouper, barracuda everywhere (singletons, small packs of 2-3, and one large school of a dozen), jacks, and spiny lobster. Key Largo also has great wrecks. The Spiegel Grove wreck (a Navy amphibious ship sunk deliberately just a few years ago)

was easily the best wreck I have dived in my young diving career and was amazing even without the gazillions of surrounding fish. It is an astounding 550 feet long and 80 feet wide sitting on the bottom on its side in 130 feet of water. Being in the water with something THAT huge is just awe inspiring. Coral was not quite as healthy and prolific as Bonaire (where it is definitely world class), but it was surprisingly in great shape. Visibility was extremely good (80-100 feet plus) at the Spiegel Grove and the Molasses Reef sites. The French Reef site and City of Washington wreck was decent viz (maybe 50 feet?) and was downright murky at the shallow Jesus Statue site (current was churning up the sand). The sites were 20-40 minutes out from shore via dive boat mostly at the edge of the national marine sanctuary. Temps were in 70s (one cool day in low 60s with 20-30 knot winds and 3-5 foot waves after a cold front blew through) and water temps were in 70s — pretty nice for early Feb! I was comfortable in my 5 mm wetsuit. Another plus is the shallow depths. Except for Spiegel Grove and the deep drift dive we did off Molasses Reef, all other sites were 20-40 feet, allowing for long bottom times. The only limitation on our dive time was the artificial one set by the dive operation at an hour so they could keep to their schedule (two dives in morning and two dives in the afternoon). I was coming up after an hour with 1100-1200 psi of air left on those shallow dives and could have stayed 20-30 minutes more. And of course, nitrogen building is not a problem at these shallow depths either...Indeed, there were actually more snorkelers

on the boat than divers. We basically had most sites to ourselves and could basically dictate within certain limitations where we dove (we submitted our request prior to arriving, which the dive shop honored almost verbatim). Now, the shore part isn't as good as other places I've dove (it not really a town at all, but a typical American-style endless line of strip malls along a busy highway for most part — except for the harbor part with its many boat canals), but it was adequate. There are some decent restaurants. But the land distractions are totally secondary to the diving! It's an hour south of Miami airport and inexpensive (there are always cheap airfares to Miami and car rentals are hardly anything). Hotels are reasonable.

Innerspace, Lime Tree Bay Resort, September 2005, Paul Lima (plintn@hotmail.com), Christiana, TN.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, choppy, currents. Third time out with Innerspace on Big Pine Key. What was impressive was the lack of hype when registering for the dive. Tim in the dive shop was matter of fact about the marginal conditions of the weather and the visibility. No promises of glassy seas and 100 ft. viz here and we appreciated his willingness to provide information even if it cost him customers. We had good dives despite the silty water from Hurricane Katrina's recent visit. Barry, an Englishman who came for a 3-week visit 15 years ago, was our captain. He was informative, helpful and laid back as far as time parameters were concerned. They run a 6-pack boat with adequate space for all equipment. Nitrox is available though the dives on

the reef never exceeded 30 ft. Looe Key is a Marine Sanctuary and as a result the fish are plentiful, large and not skittish.

Island Ventures, Rock Reef Resort, November 2004, Andrew Levin, Wellesley, MA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 F, choppy, no currents. Rock Reef Resort was a laid-back and comfortable place to stay. No food on site, but not a problem in Key Largo. Good value at about \$80/night. Island Ventures runs a professional but "no stress" operation. They had told me over the phone that there would be free demo equipment to try out on the day I reserved with them, through an arrangement with Divers Direct in Key Largo. I felt like I had been set loose in a toy store. The boat was quite comfortable for 9 divers, and Captain Brian did an excellent job picking sites and giving helpful dive briefings. We set up our own equipment and got a hand with tank and BC, which made entrances and exits easy. We dove Molasses Reef, a pretty spot with a good assortment of reef fish. Not challenging for an advanced diver, but fun nevertheless. I was able to try out a new Sealife digital camera on two dives, and a SeaDoo GTI Scooter — which added extra fun and excitement to an already enjoyable dive. Capt. Brian gave us a free hand underwater, and there was no pressure to finish the dive and move on. Spotted a Goliath Grouper under a ledge, which must have been at least 6 ft. long and over 500 lbs. And Island Ventures offered all of this at a sizeable discount from their list price as part of the special with Divers Direct. the boat is docked right behind Sund-

owners and *Senor Frijoles* restaurants — and the *Senor* provided a great post-dive spot for beer and dinner.

Island Ventures and Aquanuts, March 2005, Tim and Mary Thomas, St. Cloud, MN. Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 20 to 70 feet. Water: 63 to 65 F, choppy, surge, strong currents, no currents 1 day. Lots of current — definitely not for novices. Only one real reef system — the rest are wreck dives: Spiegel Grove, Dwayne, Washington, etc. Also saw two huge grouper under the bow of the Spiegel Grove. Haven't seen groupers this big since 25 years ago in Cozumel.

It's A Dive Water Sports, Marriott Key Largo Beach, September 2005, David N. Scarborough (david@wan2dive.com), Douglasville, GA. Experience: 400+ dives. Vis: 20 to 100 feet. Water: 84 F, calm and flat. Made two dives on Spiegel Grove, great, no current reef dives. Sharks, eagle ray, lobster, eels out of hole. Dive operator best in the Keys, change your tank between dives, nice guys.

John Pennekamp Park, Key Biscayne Park, February 2005, Betty & John Nevelus (nevstarj@msn.com), Marco Island, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 68 to 72 F., calm, choppy. Wish we had chosen independent dive shops over park operations! (Typical government incompetence, rudeness, and laziness!) These people simply do not give a final damn whether you enjoy yourself! At Pennekamp, our two divemasters were totally at odds with each other over dive procedures and constantly contradicted each others' (and, as shown below,

their own) instructions. The younger of the two seemed chiefly interested in entertaining two scantily-clad young ladies he brought along to work. The other one kept insisting I carry more weight than I knew I needed and then bitched about how much weight I was carrying when I returned to the boat after my new (and, of course, USA made) BCD malfunctioned! The younger man simply sneered, "Looks like you'll be snorkeling the rest of the day, hehe!" (There's never any extra equipment provided by these operations.) Our second day was even worse. The divemaster was a hung-over, snide Smartass who provided me with an ancient rental BCD. When my partner and I complained, he said we "obviously knew nothing about dive equipment" and threw us off the boat, while he insisted on sticking this relic of a BCD in our dive bag! He kept screaming at us like a nut, that he had had us two "incompetents" before on a trip before and he wasn't going to "put up with us again!" (I think we may have been to the park once ten years ago, and we certainly never met this character!) The boat's driver insisted on regaling us with tales of his life, including sexual conquests and other tidbits we certainly weren't at all interested in. No assistance was offered or given in loading our equipment, including the tanks we rented, onto the boat. We were finally able to get our money back. At least the desk clerk was accommodating.

Paradise Charters, Island Reef Diver, November 2004, Andrew Levin, Wellesley, MA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 F, choppy, no currents. I found an aban-

doned tent marked "Paradise Characters." They had moved. When I finally found it, the sign said "Island Reef Diver." They had been acquired by this operation. The boat set out with a few divers, divemaster and captain. When I inquired about weights to see what they had on board, they were able to turn up a total of 13 lbs — just enough for me, but the others had their own. First site was the Benwood, a shallow wreck mostly disintegrated, but a good artificial reef. The divemaster was my buddy. We circled the Benwood, where I found plenty of fish to look at, from schooling grunts to lizardfish, in tunnels and under ledges in the wreck. After about 40 minutes, the DM showed me that he was running short of air, and asked me to surface with him. I surfaced with 1,000 psi still in the tank. The DM said that "once we circled the boat once or twice, there wasn't anything more to see". Welcome to the "been there, done that" school of diving. We moved on to the second site, French Reef. Beautiful spot with swim-throughs and that day, lots of smaller reef fish. The DM didn't give me time to explore a swim through, but paddled along between the coral heads seemingly oblivious to the local residents. He managed to knock the regulator out of my mouth at one point. Once again he ran short of air and asked me to surface after about 40 minutes. His comment was "nothing to see. where were all the fish today? I guess his time was more valuable than mine, even though I had paid \$68 for a two-tank dive and still had about a third of my air supply left over, unused.

Quiescence, August 2004, Allen A. Smith, North Miami, FL. Experience:

251-500 dives. Water: choppy. I had the same experience with Quiescence that Marj did. When I showed up for my prepaid dive the clerk said, "It's pretty nasty out there. I'd recommend that you accept a refund, but if you insist, we'll take you." I accepted the refund.

Quiescence, Lime Tree Bay Resort, September 2004, Paul and Donna Lima (plintn@hotmail.com), Christiana, TN. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, choppy, currents. A return trip to Quiescence after a long hiatus due to heart surgery. As a result Donna dove Nitrox as an added precaution though the dives were to be shallow reef dives at our request. We asked for Captain John Peacock who was born in the Keys and knowledgeable about the dive sites, the local flora, fauna, weather. He had been our Captain on our last visit making it a memorable experience. He was a font of information on the effects of the recent Hurricane Katrina. The dive operation has three boats, each carrying a maximum of six divers. The boats are spotlessly clean, spacious and fully equipped with O2, etc. Our two dives were on Molasses Reef, which Captain John picked for maximum visibility given the silting from Katrina. The dive operation is excellent and caters to the dive preferences of those on board. They switch tanks between dives and assist with putting on and taking off equipment. Water is available but no snacks or beverages. Time limits are loosely enforced. Dive briefings are thorough regarding the topography and fish to be seen at the site. They suggest routes but you dive on your own. This

is a class operation.

Quiescence, Bayside Resort, May 2005, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net), Elmhurst, IL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 35 to 60 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F., choppy, surge. Good option for reef diving within easy traveling distance. Few people would describe the diving as spectacular, but lots of topside diversions. Conditions and travel times from the dock to the dive sites are often challenging for inexperienced boat divers. My 5th visit to Quiescence and they remain good. Their three 6-diver boats are comfortable but do not feature heads. Boat captains are helpful and knowledgeable. You are on your own underwater since they do not dive with you. A reservations mix-up meant that we would not get to dive one afternoon. The 3' to 4' seas prompted some of the divers to elect not to go out leaving room for me. The mix-up was uncharacteristic for Quiescence. Bayside (make reservations for a hotel/dive package through Quiescence) is a suitable choice 3 miles away from Quiescence. The continental breakfast is nothing more than coffee, OJ., apples and small Danish. UW Photography Comments: A separate camera rinse tank was provided upon request. No other on-boat or on-shore facilities.

Scuba-Do Dive Charters, Best Western Suites, October 2004, Curt & Kathy Hofer (curthofer@earthlink.net), Novi, MI. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, surge. Scuba-Do is a two-person operation. Tony Stewart is the boat's captain and Laurie Volpe is the first mate. They

conduct business right from the boat. Laurie is the contact for scheduling your dives and she can make reservations for hotels at discounted rates. Quality gear for rent. The Best Western Suites, recommended by Laurie, was a good value. The rooms are townhouse style with a common area, full bath, kitchenette, and balcony downstairs, and a good-sized bedroom with full bath upstairs. They have a small pool that was well kept. The room rate includes a continental breakfast. The Scuba-Do has open and covered areas with reasonable space to move around. It has a camera table and a good-sized fresh water rinse bucket, a head, and a rinse hose are available with a limited supply of warm water. Tank retention clips held the tanks securely in place by the bottom 1/3 of the cylinder. This allows a double strap BC to be slipped over the top and secured without the risks associated with dislodging the tank on rough days. They can accommodate ten divers but we went out each day with 3-5 divers. Entry was a giant stride; return was via a ladder up to the platform. We loaded and set-up our own gear. The first group to book the boat chooses the dive sites, subject to water conditions. They are one of the first boats out each morning so they are usually able to get the prime moorings. Briefings, given by Tony, are thorough and both Tony and Laurie are up to date on the latest interesting critter sightings: our first trip into the water yielded a visiting reef shark that they had discussed during the briefing. The number and variety of fish, coral, sponges, and other reef creatures found throughout the Pennekamp Marine

park is outstanding. Most dives do not exceed 40 feet in depth so long bottom times are the rule.

Looe Key

Looe Key Reef Resort Dive Center, February 2005, Pete & Gena Gorrell, Toronto, ONT. Experience: 300 dives. Vis: 20 to 25 ft. Water: fairly cold, some currents. Careless, sloppy operation. Tank straps wrongly threaded (we almost lost a tank). We were seriously under weighted (unfamiliar wetsuit combo). When I reported that I could not find my buddy, I was told, "Don't worry, we'll get you another." In departing one site, the boat motored directly over a marked and active dive site of another operator. We skipped dives 2 and 3 because if ever a dive "felt wrong," this was it! (And we never skip dives!) What a waste of time and money. Safety/rescue gear appeared missing or inaccessible. No one among crew was suited or seemed prepared to assist in water if necessary.

Marathon Key

Captain Morgan's Dive Tours, September 2005, Kirk Adams, Shrewsbury, NJ. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 20 to 30 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. This is the third time my wife and I have been diving with Captain Doug Morgan, who knows the area around Marathon extremely well and focuses on the diving experience. There is no shop associated with his operation; however he has all the rental equipment you need. Plenty of support for donning gear, exiting/entering the boat (backroll/dive ladder), and tanks are switched between

dives. Ample cold bottled water is supplied. The boat leaves out of the Banana Bay Resort Marina. Usually two 2-tank trips per day in a 28' Mako. Night dives are available. Trips are limited to 6 divers so there is plenty of room for people and gear. Trip itineraries are based on a first come, first serve basis, so if you have a particular dive site in mind, ask. On our latest trip the visibility was reduced from Hurricane Rita — inner reefs (e.g., Sombrero Reef had visibility less than 5 ft), however Captain Morgan dropped us on some deeper reefs (60'+ depth, Edge of Darkness and Smokey Mtn./Anchor Reef) with 20-30 ft visibility. Saw enormous porcupine fish that I would have had difficulties getting my arms around (and it was not inflated). We enjoyed the normal array of corals, barrel sponges, angel-fish, snapper, grouper, and other reef life. The highlight was the Thunderbolt, a 188' military vessel sunk in 120' of water. Large barracuda, schools of bar jack, yellow tail snapper, and permit. However, I did not to see the resident Goliath Grouper — it was probably hanging just beyond the visibility. The wreck has taken on quite a bit of growth. While the colors are dulled at depth, photos show an array of reds, oranges, and yellows decorating the hull. There are plenty of areas to explore on the wreck itself, from the straightforward tower swim throughs to more challenging lower hull penetrations.

Pompano Beach

MV Ocean Explorer, Sands Harbor Marina, February 2005, Al, Baldwin, NY. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 70 to 72 F., calm,

choppy. Goal of trip was to dive deeper extended range wrecks in the Pompano beach/Ft Lauderdale area. The boat offers both live-aboard, but these would be day trips with sleeping onshore at the hotel associated with the marina. The boat is a 55ft fiberglass boat, two ladders, including a t bar ladder preferred when climbing with stages. They have an onboard compressor. All diving gases were part of a package; we didn't need to move gear on and off each day. Trimix and deco gas fills were done accurately by the boat staff. The boat was short staffed. Each day the first team was asked to set the hook by the boat as they only had one mate. This also meant that each team had to help the others in and out. At this level each should be able to do this, but those expecting premium service might be disappointed. Such is tech diving. The captain was experienced at finding the wrecks and at overseeing drifting deco dives, which are required by the Gulf stream currents in this part of offshore Florida. We dove the Hydro Atlantic, Lowrance, RBJ, and Skycliffe. Each is a spectacular dive, with good vis and light current. I attempted some photography inside these wrecks, I need to learn to deal with floating particulate rust and backscatter, otherwise the diving was fun. The hotel was another matter. They told me I would have my room moved on the first night, because they had my room booked to another party. Every other day I was summoned to the front desk to be informed of the status of my room. The method used was to shut off my electronic room key, denying my access to my room. During the week I was never moved. The other members of my party were not so lucky.

They returned after the third day to find that the staff had moved their possessions without informing them. Their stuff was placed into garbage bags and moved during the day. Except for the roughly four grand that my friend had in the in-room safe. A room that was then given to another couple. My friend had to wait until the others returned to the hotel and discovered their key was turned off to get his money out of the safe. The manager refused to provide any accommodation for this treatment, remarking that we should be happy to get a good rate (<\$90 us per day) and stop complaining. The rooms were somewhat rundown and smelled of mold. The maids were seen only on the last day, apparently they only deal with rooms after you leave. I am a beginning UW photographer and this was a deep technical trip. However the operation would be accommodating to any level of photographer.

Tavernier

Divers City, Ocean Pointe Suites, November 2004, Colleen Duke, Chicago, IL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy. We brought a new diver down to the Keys to do check-out dives. We were pleased with both Divers City and Ocean Pointe Suites. Divers City has one boat that takes no more than 10 divers. We never had more than 6. Bob and Barbara did their best to take us to sites where the advanced divers would be able to wander and see some critters while the new divers were doing skills. On our drift dives, we were allowed to remain under while the instructor took the new folks back to the surface. Saw sharks on

three out of four days and were stalked by large remoras on one dive. Visibility ok. Dive on the Duane was great. Lots of fish life. Wish we did Nitrox on this one — the dive was way too short. Ocean Pointe Suites is just a couple miles up the road from Divers City. Free continental breakfast every AM was a nice bonus. Had a full kitchen to eat at home and save money for the diving. No need for an ocean view suite, we had an island view that had the water as well.

Tropic Vista Dive Resort, May 2005, Jeremy Ellis (jeremyellis@earthlink.net), Atlanta, GA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, choppy. The Tropic Vista Motel is ideal for someone who wants 4-5 dives a day and just a room to sleep. The rooms are typical motel rooms (double beds, cable TV, small refrigerator, small bathroom). The dock and dive boat are at the back of the motel and there is a small restaurant next to the motel. The motel has a decent swimming pool and there are several restaurants nearby. Next to the dock are a sizeable freshwater rinse bucket and a large locker to store and dry your equipment overnight. Captain Don, and his crew know all the dive spots and take exceptional care of their divers. The dive boat has oxygen, new radios, extensive first aid kit, large head. The staff does roll calls. Don and his first mate, Jeff, give excellent briefings of the dive sites and go the extra mile with photographers to point them in the best direction for photos. They are flexible on taking the boat out with a small party and can manage larger crowds. The boat had as few as six div-

ers and as many as 20. The afternoon dives tended to be emptier. Access to some great entertainment in the evening.

West Palm Beach

Jim Abernethy Scuba Adventures, October 2004, Jeff Morrison, Bursville, NC. Experience: 115 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 ft. Water: 80 to 81 F, surge. Jim and Anna Abernethy are knowledgeable and polite. Seas are generally rough of West Palm Beach, so better take your Dramamine or apply the patch.

Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, June 2005, Dave Jackson (thecolt@juno.com), Orem, UT. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy, currents. Reefs were in poor condition. Lots of brown algae. We saw several large and one huge loggerhead turtle that kept us interested. Several large parrot fish and a few other tropicals, not much else. Many divers of varying skill and experience. Currents were strong and divers would get strung out over a large area. The captain seemed skilled and careful. Only once did I wonder if we would get picked up. Other crew seemed inexperienced and did little to keep things manageable. We dove two days with this shop and dove the same sites both days. They told us we could dive some wrecks but could not with all of novice divers on board. Poor service for advanced divers. Staff at the shop itself were not helpful and unfriendly.

North Carolina

Diver Down, Clamdigger Ramada, July 2005, Ron & Sherry Smith, Levittown,

PA. Experience: 361 dives. Vis: 70 to 80 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, surge, strong currents. Clamdigger Resort excellent — all rooms ocean view. Short ride to marina in Atlantic Beach where boat was docked. Excellent dive operation — crew friendly and helpful. Atlantic ocean boat rides a lot rougher than we are used to (Caribbean). Submarine U352 tons of tropicals and clear water. Carib Sea wreck great dive: tons of large sand tiger sharks. Best restaurant in Atlantic Beach — Lawry's Landing.

Discovery Diving, August 2005, Steve Woerner (swoerner@att.net), Huffman, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 76 to 82 F, calm. Our 3rd trip to NC graveyard in last five years. Each time has been with Discovery Diving on the Captain's Lady. Captain Leroy provides customer satisfaction and a safe dive trip. Our group of six are advanced divers and given the latitude to plan and execute our own profiles. Captain Leroy listened to our requests for specific wrecks and offered his advice on where we could get the most bang for the buck. The dives were outstanding with sharks on five of six dives with the 6th being the "must see" U235. Discovery Diving delivered as promised and is a diver friendly operation. Accommodations were at the Discovery Diving "bunk house" a convenient and clean (and inexpensive) alternative to a hotel.

Discovery Diving, September 2005, Angela Lockhart, Sterling, VA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm, choppy. The boat crews were excellent — great

service and friendly. Would definitely request Jerry as our boat captain. The shop staff was fairly rude. They would barely give me the time of day until they found out I was the trip leader of a large group; then suddenly, I got service. We had 2 cute women in our group and they gave them a hard time in the store. Once we had been there a couple of days and they got to know us (meaning we had some big spenders in our group), then the level of service changed. No camera table on boat

Olympus, October 2004, Mort Rolleston, Arlington, VA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Water: 70 to 75 F, choppy. I dove 30 miles off Morehead City, NC (about two hour boat ride out). We did two dives a day for two days on a German U-boat (U-352), a 400+ foot tanker that was sunk by (another) U-boat (Papoose), a Coast Guard cutter deliberately sunk as artificial reef (Spar), and a former German gunboat from WW1 that US captured that then collided with a ship and sank (Schurz) soon after. I liked the Papoose the best with the U-Boat also being pretty cool. Schurz was mostly rubble along bottom with various guns, boilers, and such still intact and has thus attracted a lot of fish. Spar is a cool wreck and in the best shape as it was recently sunk (and apparently is perfect for wreck penetration training) with lots of fish — but visibility was not great (too close to shore). It did create a rather eerie atmosphere which was pretty cool actually since the ship basically looked like a ghost in the fog and you couldn't see that far away. Visibility was quite good at 40-60 feet (if not more) on most (only 20-30 on Spar, which is close to

shore). Hurricanes had really stirred up the sand on the ocean bottom and had just started to clear up. Most wrecks had at one to three 7-10 foot sand tiger sharks (harmless, laid back sharks with lots of teeth but no attitude, but who like to come up and check you out — you can often see small specimens in aquariums because of their calm demeanor and mean look), clouds of thick bait ball schools of small fish that could be 50 or more feet in circumference with lots of barracuda and amberjacks stalking them. Wrecks also had a lot of spadefish, bank sea bass on the wreck surfaces, porgies, and triggerfish among others. We saw what we thought was a small thresher shark from a distance on the Papoose. The fish (of all shapes and sizes) were not shy. One of the sharks at U-boat practically ran me over (got within arms reach) at a slow, calm pace (just calmly checking me out) — cool! One of the funniest scenes was at the U-Boat where a guy with an underwater writing pad was furiously scribbling down something as he cruised close to the hull. The big sand tiger there crept right up behind the guy as if he/she was trying to look over his shoulder to figure out (like the rest of us) what the heck he was writing! The guy was so focused, he never noticed the shark parked up right behind him. He probably would have had a heart attack if he had turned around. A layer of amberjacks and barracuda (both 2-5 feet long) hung out at around the 50 foot depth and would occasionally sweep down into the bait balls of fish at the wrecks to feed and return to their formation with lunch. The wrecks are at 100-130 feet, so I was concerned that the dives would be really short be-

cause you cannot stay at that depth for more than 10-15 minutes and there is a lot of nothing between the surface and the ocean floor. Fortunately, these layers of amberjacks and barracuda gave us a reason to hang out longer at middle depths on the anchor line. Jacks and barracuda are curious and will swim right up to you (and are a pretty good size). Seas were pretty calm as were the currents (which were only significant on one of the dives). Weather was partly sunny 70s both days. Half the boat was from DC and most of rest was from Long Island. Everyone was pretty cool... It was interesting that there were no rules against taking artifacts, spear fishing, or capturing fish. One guy speared a few fish and took them to shore (boat had big freezer). Another took a small tank designed to store captured fish for aquariums (he snagged a small lionfish from the U-Boat).

Olympus Dive Center, July 2005, Guy Johnson (siberia@netexpress.net), Coal Valley, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F., calm. We flew into Raleigh-Durham airport, rented a car for the drive to Morehead City, NC. The boat was excellent. There was O₂, and first aid kits on board, plenty of dry areas for dressing/cameras and a clean and functional head. Excellent under-seat gear storage that was locked up each evening after diving. Plenty of deck space to relax, sunbathe. Coolers for food/beverages and fresh water available. We had a choice of alum 80s or 100s. All air fills were in the 3200-3500 range. Nitrox available for a slight cost. While about 20 minutes from the dive site a call to gear up a given. Thorough

briefing was given. Once in the water camera gear was lowered by staff. The camera rinse barrel could be larger. A series of lines were placed under the boat to direct us to the wreck. These also had regulators for anyone who ran short on air. It made for an easy return to the boat and for safety stops. There are two ladders on the stern of the "fins on" type. Once on the stern deck, the staff helped in removing your fins. We dove the wrecks of the Indra, Suloidé, Papoose, Boxwreck, and the famous German submarine, the U-352. Huge schools, virtually "walls" of fish on every dive ... and plenty of eels, rays and of course the huge sand tiger sharks the area is known for. The dive shop is well tended with Lauren Hermley running a smooth operation. George Purifoy was the perfect host/owner/captain/story teller. Matt from Iowa City was a perfect divemaster who stayed on top of everything. The boat rides to most wrecks were in the two hour range, and most dives are over 110ft the surface intervals were in the two hour range so bring sun screen. We stayed at the shops Dive Lodge less than two blocks from the dock. The cost was reasonable. The lodge while not fancy had all we needed. A clean safe place to sleep, fool around with our gear and chat with other divers. The Lodge is made up of simple bunk beds, some rooms having four bunks and other having eight bunks. Separate and ample shower/toilets and sinks for both males and females. A lounging area with TV and small kitchen area. Free parking. Huge schools of fish on each wreck. One diver's tank fell and crushed his Air-II, Divemaster Matt repaired it in minutes

with no lost dives and no frowns. All the staff was friendly and professional. Meals at nearby restaurants good and fair priced. Small rinse barrel for the cameras. Other divers seldom showed up on time to depart, which meant that those of us who did arrive on time had to cool our jets and wait.

Olympus, July 2005, Ed Noga, Akron, OH. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 74 to 85 F, choppy. Ah, Mighty Olympus: What's happened? I've been with this dive operation many times, have even taken courses with them. OK, it's a cattle-boat operation, but they still get you to the wrecks, and weren't reluctant to take us offshore to the Papoose and Schurz despite somewhat rough seas. It was a long, slow, trip to the Papoose, and lots of folks chummed the sea with their breakfast, particularly after they sat around in their dive gear sweating in 90 degree weather in a rocking boat while the divemaster gave a long dive briefing. The Papoose was excellent, with sand tigers, turtles and lots of fish. Nice dive. The boat meandered over to the Schurz. They wanted everyone to wait two hours before the next dive, even if you were on nitrox (no deco diving permitted). The Schurz was wonderful, with 120-ft. viz on the empty bottom. Empty because half the divers gave up and didn't do the second dive, choosing to sleep or hurl more. Their loss. We then enjoyed an hour of weighing anchor — or was the crew spearfishing...I dunno—followed by the slowest boat ride in calm seas I've ever taken. Hey, fuel costs are high. We arrived at the shop at the prescribed 6:15 a.m. and returned to the dock at 5 p.m.

That's a long day for two dives. Lots of fun, until we tried to get our money back for canceling the next day's dives. Olympus' refund policy is if they fill your spot, you get your bucks back. At least, that's it on paper. Inquiring if the boat was filled for the next day ("Oh yeah, full boat."), and then asking for the refund, we got hems and haws, and a slip of the tongue: "Oh, we rarely give refunds." Discovery Diving down the road recently gave us a refund when we did one, rather than two, dives because of the weather. No "store coupon," no BS, unasked for. UW Photography Comments: They had a table and a rinse tank. Good enough.

Olympus Dive Center, Midnight Express, August 2005, Al Marvelli (ajmarve@optonline.net), Baldwin, NY. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, calm, choppy, currents. The diving seems excellent, the dive shop seems to balance between being a hardcore wreck diving place and dealing with photo people flying in from everywhere. The group we had was experienced northeast wreckers and the staff focused on telling us what we couldn't do, but politely. The wrecks were beautiful and the sand tigers showed up as if on cue. the current can rip. A dive on the U-boat was quite a ride and would not have been a place for a beginner — or a northeast nut job with a 45 minute obligation. The bunkhouse seemed a little chaotic; the shop owner's wife runs an antique shop behind it and a word with her cleared up a few issues. However, it is first come, first serve dorm style housing. The people who showed up at 1230am and found it over booked slept

on the couches in the lounge. The bar next door was good eating, not much to do in town.

Outer Banks Diving, July 2005, Rick Tuss (rtuss@aol.com), Wilmington, DE. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 57 to 78 F, choppy. We have been diving out of Hatteras every July 4 for the last eight years. Due to the weather, it's rare to squeeze in three straight days of good diving, but we've done it two years in a row. The only real problem on this trip was the water temp on Diamond Shoals... the bottom temp on the Australia was 57 F! Great for a dry suit, but not nice in a 3mm wetsuit. A big draw is the abundance of sand tigers... beautiful, big, and graceful. Although we dived the Dixie Arrow a couple times, it still provides good life with lots to see and loads of bottom time. I have always had great dives on the Proteus and this was no exception: 10 foot sand tigers, loggerhead turtle, Goliath grouper, angels, triggers, black bass. Bottom temp on all the other dives, including the Proteus, never dropped below 73 F and were normally around 75 F. Plenty warm for a 3mm. Outer Banks Diving crew on the Bayou Runner... fantastic. First rate bunch of folks, including Johnny, the owner and captain. He did a fantastic job of captaining and customer service.

South Carolina — Myrtle Beach

Coastal Scuba, March 2005, Mark Malin (marksmalin@msn.com), Exton, PA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 60 to 65 F, choppy, currents. This was a decompression

dive trip and Coastal had no clue what to do. 3 crew members and the captain did not want to help at all, and when asked to hand a mask to a diver, looked annoyed. Divemaster said little current but there was 2-3 knot; half of 15 divers never got to the wreck. Ladder is fins off and made for difficult and dangerous exits. 4-foot swells, which is common here. Crew could not see where we were tied in on 400-ft. wreck or how wreck lies in sand. No mention of safety equipment on board. We had to ask for mask rinse bucket and no accommodations on board for cameras.

VENEZUELA

Los Roques is a short flight from Caracas, and is roughly parallel with Bonaire. Diving can be more edgy with the chance of seeing bigger schools. Los Frailes, the only town, is tiny and charming, and Spanish is spoken

Las Roques

Aquanauts, December 2004, Nancy Cheris (necjcc@ptd.net), Wellsville, PA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 78 F, calm, no currents. The service and fun we had diving Los Frailes was exceptional. We were met at port by the owner who transported our gear and us to a taxi. We rode about 90 minutes across the island to a beach. (Free sightseeing trip!) We all helped push the boat over the sandbar then proceeded across the bay (45 minutes) to the coral islands. Pearl oysters everywhere. Water was cool by Caribbean standards and clear. The

divemasters opened the shells and let us feed the fish. This was not a marine sanctuary so we could wear gloves and knives. On the way back, the divemasters opened oysters for anyone who wished to partake. Beer was served, too. We even found a small seed pearl in one of the oysters. One of the best dive trips of the vacation. Isla Margarita is a great place to dive with Aquanauts. The only drawback is the lack of restroom facilities on land. The reasonable price of \$85 included the taxi. Be sure to have cash or travelers checks and money for tips and t-shirts. Contact Aquanauts at aquanautsvenezuela@hotmail.com UW Photography Comments: Rinse buckets on board. Cameras handed to us after we entered the water.

VIRGIN ISLANDS, BRITISH

Patch reef diving on these closely grouped islands is easy, pleasant, and fairly similar despite which island you choose. The islands are small, friendly, and great getaways.

Cooper Island Beach Club, September 2004, Mark & Lynn Thorne. (thorne@mindspring.com), Raleigh, NC. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Our second trip to Cooper Island. The hotel staff and the dive staff at Caribbean Sail provide excellent customer service. Cooper Island is a quaint, out of the way, destination; free from the usual tourist trappings. You're awakened every morning by a gentle breeze and the sound of tropical birds singing outside your room. Your room looks over