

Weather marginal again with some wind and rain, cloudy and poor vis. On to Aruba ... Pelican at Holiday Inn is the best in Aruba. Antilles, Perdonales and Malmok Reef. Excellent fish and coral development. Sun was out and vis improved to nearly 100 ft. This 3-dive special with lunch at pier restaurant for \$97 is outstanding value - booked over internet, not ship. Jerry is great as new Manager at Pelican. This is the best and lowest cost way to dive four different islands in one week. The ship is your resort with inclusive everything. Do not book the ship's shore excursions for experienced diving. Use the internet and book individually with each operator. They will meet the ship's schedule easily to accommodate their clients. Excellent UWP/Computer facilities on the ship for print or disc.

THE BAHAMAS

AquaCat, October 2005, Juli Tracy, San Diego, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, surge. The first week was beautifully calm and diving was the usual good walls and gardens, with some unusual dive sites (for the AquaCat) thrown in. The crew, dive staff and captain and everyone else, was friendly, organized and ran a safe and organized operation. Then, the second week, as we were in Georgetown in the Lower Exumas, the beginnings of Hurricane Rita moved in! We were anchored for a couple of days at Georgetown, Great Exuma, waiting for the storm to blow over, then had some more days of low vis diving, due to the storm. If the weather hadn't kicked in, this would have been an excellent trip. We recommend the AquaCat, for good diving, excellent accommodations,

good food and most of all, a competent and knowledgeable crew. Great camera tables, rinse tanks and charging stand. Lots of space and knowledgeable dive professionals aboard. Hookups for TV and DVDs to show pictures at night.

AquaCat, May 2006, Ralph Asher, Fort Collins, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm. I was able to do 25 dives without any feeling of over-exertion. The dives were varied and included two fun drift dives. I saw my first hammerhead and many nurse and reef sharks. They allowed us to board as soon as we arrived in the morning and didn't force us to wait until 8 PM like Nekton does. The galley was beautiful, and the food was gourmet and varied. The number of divers was limited to 18 and the dive deck was spacious, and included two enclosed showers and a spacious head. My roommate and I never had to use our cabin shower as we just used these two instead. The two shore trips were interesting and fun. The evenings that we arrive and before departure were exciting as we could visit the casino in Nassau for gambling and entertainment. That they had two places with sodas and beer on tap as well as rum drinks as part of the package. And Nitrox was \$100. I There was ample room and many outlets for rechargeable battery packs. It was the best set up I had ever encountered.

AquaCat, July 2006, Bill Shepherd (Chorsejbs@aol.com), Satellite Beach, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. Berthed in Nassau, it's easy to reach and sails to sites seldom visited in the Exumas and Eleuthera chains. Variety of sites to include walls, swim throughs, blue holes, and drift dives. Up to 5 dives a day at various sites gives divers of all

skill levels multiple opportunities. Fish life varies from sharks, rays, turtles to nudibranchs and tiny shrimp. Boat is configured specifically for divers with ample sized suites, individual bathrooms, plenty of hot water, daily maid service, individually controlled A/C in each room. Dive deck is laid out to ensure each diver has ample space for all their gear and is convenient for entering and exiting the water. Salon and eating area are spacious and meals varied and tasty. Chef caters to individual requests and needs and fresh between meals snacks are available. Entire crew is customer oriented and capable of helping in any situation. Excellent support facilities to include E6 processing, slide viewing tables, computers for digital and videos, superb photo area on dive deck for assembling and maintaining cameras. Staff extremely knowledgeable and supportive of UWPs.

AquaCat, August 2006, Kent Bonde (bkdiver@msn.com), Miami Shores, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm. The Australian designed and built AquaCat measures 31 meters or 91 feet in length and sports a 10 meter or 30 foot beam, providing for spacious guest rooms, a huge salon and plenty of room to accommodate 22 passengers without the feel of a cattle boat. Departing from Nassau, AquaCat's itinerary takes you to the north end of the Exumas, Eleuthera, Little San Salvador and the East end of New Providence (Nassau). The diving includes a good combination of walls, shallow reefs and probably one of the best in-your-face shark dives. Overall, the diving was somewhat disappointing due to a noticeable lack of marine life. The best diving was in the Exumas Land and Sea Park, which had healthy corals, abundant marine life and was also where the shark dive was conduct-

ed. Divers are allowed the discretion of diving their own profiles and nitrox is available. The quality of the crew, the level of service and the comfort of the accommodations on board were unparalleled. Roomy camera table with three padded shelves for storage and multiple locations to plug in chargers. E-6 processing available as well as multimedia capabilities to download digital pics.

AquaCat, September 2006, Captain Jim Davis (jdavis0001@comcast.net), Ponte Veda Beach, FL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy. We have been on 12 live-aboard trips. Captain Mark and his most capable crew work hard to make the trip to the Exumas memorable. For non-divers the AquaCat has a 28 ft Seadog used to take them on several snorkeling and shore excursions. Kayaks are also available. The dive deck is the best we have encountered on a vessel with a 35 ft beam makes for no crowding even with 21 divers on board. Large storage bin for personal gear, two fresh water showers on the dive deck, rinse tanks for mask and cameras of course. Lots of space between divers. Briefs were excellent, assistance with gear terrific, night dives most every night but, of course, one alcoholic drink and your dive day is over. As a dive safety officer with a state recognized reef research team in Northeast Florida. I am safety oriented and in all categories the AquaCat passes with flying colors from having a safety stop bar with two hookah regulators, two night dive strobes beneath the vessel, NITROX, crew on the dive deck, in and out tag system, no diving until the safety Zodiac is in the water, mostly moored dives with little current. The Captain would select dive sites were current and wind conditions were favorable for diving, and nearly as im-

portant eating the most delicious meals prepared by Iron Chef Kirk we have had. Roomy staterooms and salon / dining area inside. Easy to get to Nassau where they make transfer arrangements coming and going.

Blackbeard's, April 2006, Don McWilliams (donmcwilly@aol.com), **Visalia, CA.** Experience: 100+ dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy. Great crew, great time, weather poor but crew did their best to make up for it. Definitely camping at sea, but a bargain. Windy, so we took advantage of that and did a lot of sailing. Dove a lot of wrecks and did an incredible shark dive, with literally sharks in your face. Problem with generator but repaired right away. Crew likes to spend time at the End of the World Bar in Bimini. First Atlantic dive trip for this California boy. Blackbeard's is a blast!

Blackbeard's, May 2006, Tom and Vonce Hoffman, Denver, IA. (tomhoffman@starband.net) Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Our second trip with Blackbeard's. Could use better shower facilities back on land at the end of the trip, 3 boats and everyone trying to get a shower at the end of the trip was hard, but they have only been at their new location in Freeport Grand Bahama since January, and improvements are being made and more showers are in the future. The trip was good, the shark dive awesome. One of the night dives we saw lots of barracudas and many large loggerhead turtles and hawksbills. Lots of schools of small fish, barracudas and rays. Some really spectacular corals and sponges on some of the sites. A great trip and well worth the money. We saw other live aboards diving the same sites or close and I know they charge a lot more. UW Photogra-

phy Comments: Just rinse tank, nothing else, you are on your own.

Blackbeard's, June 2006, Guy Johnson (siberia01@netzero.net), **Coal Valley, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. This is a tough one as I love Blackbeard's, been on four of them. Since the boats are now based in Freeport, Bahamas, they have created a problem for themselves. Since they are close to base compared to being based out of Miami, they will linger in the area offshore to allow divers who have either chosen less direct flights, lost or misplaced gear, etc. All other divers on the boat have to settle for shallow, boring, fishless sites just off Freeport harbor until the gear or divers show up. This never happened when they were based in Miami, you either rented gear, made the departure time or got left behind. We had two divers who saved around \$30 on their airline tickets and thus held up the entire boat waiting for them (and bragged about their savings to those of us who planned our trips to fit the posted departure times). Not fair to the rest of us as it cost us a day of better diving! This is a nice gesture for those who don't plan their trips like adults but not so good for the divers who did show up on time. Why have departure times when you don't hold to them? Basically it cost the rest of the boat the chance of having better dive sites for the day. Not to mention the 25 knot storm we had to ride out waiting for them as well when we should have been well out of harms way! I doubt if the ones with their heads in the sink/toilets puking thought much of the \$30 savings! The boats are listed as "camping on a boat" and that is fine but these ships need to be updated. The a/c isn't reliable, the ice machine seldom had ice (they tried to get by with one small bag of ice each day), the

soft drink dispenser didn't work half the time, bunks near the heads smelled of urine. The meals were filling but more than a bit boring except for one excellent roast beef/prime rib dinner. Whatever didn't get eaten at a meal would show up again and again until it was gone. I don't mind leftovers and understand the desire to save a buck, but I don't think we should see some food item get passed through three meals. They did have a decent snack or desert after the dinner meal or night dive. The crew tried, but for most of them, their heart just wasn't in it. They have installed stations for tanks, meaning you now have the same tank all week long compared with a different one for each dive as in the past. The bases of these tank stations do not have any room for the diver to sit down to get either ungeared or geared up for a dive. The tanks are positioned too close to each other which makes getting tangled in the next divers gear a concern. It's way too crowded! The shark feed/dive was good if short. Seems that whatever fish are caught determines how many will be used as bait. So the shark dive can be, short, like less than 30 seconds! We dove mostly shallow dives on reefs that had little to offer. The exception was one wall dive that was excellent! The main night dive was on a wreck way too small for the number of divers. The trip wasn't terrible, but nothing compared with what Blackbeard's has been in the past. They still have the welcome cookout on shore but when three boatloads of nearly 70+ hungry divers have to wait over an hour to get one burger or hotdog, tensions get elevated. They either need to get a bigger grill or more staff doing the cooking or both! On shore they have a fresh water shower/bath that helps to wash the salt off you at the weeks end. One shower/bath for

over 20 people takes a long time, let alone factor in that three boats often show up at the same time ... can make for some real long lines! On shore they offer free internet service and an area with a TV, dart board and pool table to kill the time waiting for your stint in the shower/bath. Blackbeard's is still a bargain, but some of the fun has left the operation. When you add in their increased rates, then the added airfare to and from Freeport, the value seems like less of a deal.

Blackbeard's, August 2006, Alan Radzun (chgodvr@yahoo.com), Oak Forest, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm. The diving was for the most part great. The only bad dive was one described as a wall dive. Did not see a wall, nor much of anything else; I've seen better walls in the quarry. The night dive was fantastic. So was the shark dive. Weather conditions were mostly good and the captain avoided bad weather as much possible; lost only 2 dives to storms and he kept us in relatively calm waters. Accommodations on Blackbeard's are close. It reminded me of summer camp. If you enjoyed that experience, you'll love Blackbeard's. If you want occasional privacy, you won't get it here. Accommodations are Spartan, the food is edible but not memorable, and the service is definitely hit or miss. I've done live-aboards in the past and you get what you pay for. Blackbeard's is half the price of other live-aboards so expect the equivalent level of accommodations and service.

Blackbeard's Cruises, August 2006, Alan Radzun (chgodvr@yahoo.com), Oak Forest, IL. Experience: 800+ dives. Vis: 70 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm and flat, light current. This is a low-cost dive-aboard. You get what you

pay for. The diving was great. Plenty of fish life on every dive. Capt. Red was excellent. We lost only ½ day's diving due to weather. The accommodations, food and quality of service were Spartan at best. This is camping on the water.

Caribbean Explorer I, February 2006, Jack Gullo Jr. (jgullo@carr.org), New Windsor, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Excellent boat and crew. 5 dives per day; great food in between. Hammerhead sharks; great macro critters; even great shore excursion in San Salvador. A great value and a great trip. Dedicated camera table; rinse tank; air hose. Lots of room and respect for camera gear.

Caribbean Explorer I, June 2006, Jeanne and Bill Downey, Baden, PA. (travelexpert@comcast.net) Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Our group arrived in George Town throughout Saturday and were promptly met by a taxi sent by Explorer Ventures for a \$10, fifteen minute ride to the Marine Services dock. Before introductions were even made, we were instructed by the Captain to set up our dive gear. Once done, they hauled our baggage to our rooms and we were allowed to explore the boat. The boat is 100' long and efficiently laid out. The upper level has a couple tables under the shade and eight lounge chairs tied down out in the sun. The four cabins with private baths are on this level; two have double beds and two have double beds with upper bunk. The main level includes the dive deck, dining area, and galley. Down the steps in the dining area are the five cabins that share two showers and heads. Each cabin has a double bed, upper bunk, sink, and no window. All the cabins were small with not much standing

room, but no one spent much time in them. Sharing the two bathrooms didn't elicit any complaints; there was also a toilet on the dive deck, along with two hot water showers. The dive deck has the usual tank stations around the perimeter with cubby holes below. The 3-tiered camera table quickly got crowded with more than half a dozen photographers and all their paraphernalia. There is a large camera rinse tank and another rinse tank for wet suits with an added disinfectant. Two wet suit hanging bars were in the center area, out of the way enough that they didn't slap you in the face or get in the way. With a group of friends, at least, it felt surprisingly roomy. Going down the steps at the stern was a good-sized entry area, and getting up the ladder was easy with the nice wide steps that were easy on the feet. The steps were closer together than normal so smaller steps were required. Breakfast consisted of cereal, hot oatmeal, pancakes, eggs, bacon, and bagels. Lunch was anything from tacos to rigatoni, usually up on the sun deck. Supper ranged from steak to fish, served in the dining room. The food was good and the chef tried to accommodate special dietary requests. Soft drinks and Crystal Light were always available, as were cookies and fruit. Beer and wine were complimentary, and the common rule of no diving after you start drinking was enforced. We started our trip with two easy dives about an hour away from George Town, at Stocking Island, then did a couple more on a sunken tugboat, including a night dive, while we waited for one suitcase to make its appearance. When it didn't show up, the boat headed for Long Island early the next morning. The farther east we went in the Bahamas, to Conception Island and Sal Salvador, the better the diving. On

a night dive at Conception Island we watched a good-sized octopus fold itself over a fish trying to escape. We also saw turtles, schools of jacks, plenty of other fish and lots of cleaning stations, some with waiting lines. It was great to see so many decent sized Nassau and tiger groupers. We followed a dozen blue parrotfish and a lone hammerhead. At Wedge Point we wandered over to a coral ridge; the fish were easy to approach. After spending a bumpy 3+ hours, we arrived at San Salvador with its deep walls, swim-throughs, expansive sandy slopes, and continual algae growth. We spent the next three days there and saw a dozen or more hammerhead sharks, huge porcupinefish, massive coral walls and barrel sponges, and lots of fish life. Oscar the grouper played with everyone. We had requested diving at Rum Cay but were told they are rarely able to get there due to sea conditions. The last morning of diving, a 6am dive option was offered before the trek back toward George Town. The last dive was a silty low-visibility dive off Conception Island — disappointing. Then it was back to George Town where the missing bag was waiting for its owner. We had dinner at a local restaurant and partied the night away. Saturday morning we were eventually politely kicked off the boat so they could get it ready for the next group; we wandered around town and eventually strolled back to the boat where the taxis were already loaded with our luggage, waiting to take us to the airport. It had been over 20 years since we dove in the Bahamas; we were pleasantly surprised at the quality of the diving and number of hammerhead sharks we saw. Being on a live-aboard was great because neither the heat nor mosquitoes were a problem, and we were able to dive up to five times a day. We liked just about

everything about the boat except the diving schedule and sites on the last day and our super strict head divemaster who wouldn't even let us in the dining area long enough to get a hot cup of tea after a dive if we had on damp swim-suits. There didn't seem to be any kind of bonding between crew members that is usually seen on a live-aboard, but few underwater restrictions were imposed on our experienced group—the in-water staff was happy to be able to go off on their own with their cameras once everyone was in the water. A great time.

Caribbean Explorer, July 2006, Don and Marilee Hughes, Stewartville, MN.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 125 Feet. Water: 82 to F, calm. A great week of Bahamas diving. First dive Sunday morning in San Salvador, then back to Conception Island and Long Island before returning to Georgetown Friday afternoon. Twenty-seven dives were possible. First dive of the day was after breakfast. Night dives were after supper. Each divers depth and remaining air was recorded at the end of dives. A dive master was available as a dive buddy or to provide a guided tour if requested. All reefs we visited were in good condition. Notable was the beautiful walls of San Salvador with elephant ear sponges, gorgonians, and black coral. Usual Caribbean assortment of tropicals, smaller critters, and macro subjects present, also including swimming crinoids, arrow blennies, neck crabs, leech headshield slugs, tunicates, and a common comet star. Lionfish were seen on several dives. Hammerheads were seen on many the dives. Crew was attentive, jovial, friendly, and willing to assist. The crew had a good attitude, functioned well together and seemed to enjoy their jobs. Tropical Storm Chris was bearing down on our path mid-trip. The Captain provided twice a day

briefings with maps and printed reports keeping us keenly informed. Fortunately, Chris wobbled course and weakened. Subsequently, we finished our week of diving without any interferences. An unannounced emergency drill was conducted by the crew and required by all people on board. Tank fills averaged about 3100 psi. Nitrox fills averaged 31%. Two hot water showers above dive platform. Boat was in good repair and clean. Lower rooms have a vanity, but share showers and toilets. Upper rooms all have private bath and toilet. Room AC worked well. Comfortable bed. Rooms cleaned during breakfast. Substantial storage area under bunks for luggage. Beds turned down in evening. Towels changed midweek. Hot water was dependable. Good lighting in room, including bright reading light in bed and well-placed light over vanity mirror. Connections were provided for listening to Ipods through the boat sound system on the upper deck. Food was good and plentiful. Between dive snacks was provided. Coffee, tea, pop, wines, local beer and Heineken with the usual assortment of hard liquor was present. The Captain requested to know if a specific hard liquor wasn't present on the boat so they could try to fill the request. It was a good week of diving and a bargain. UW Photography Comments: Crew did a great job of keeping the camera table dedicated to only cameras. Camera towels provided. Similarly, rinse tank for cameras was clean and only used for cameras. Three strip chargers provided at charging station. Crew was careful with camera hand off and respectful of camera gear. In cabin laptop work had to be completed on bunk or sink vanity. However, electrical outlets at each table in salon were handy for laptop work.

Caribbean Explorer I, August 2006,

William Ungerma (Elitecorps@aol.com), Santa Ana, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, calm, choppy, no currents. Nice boat. You fly into George Town, Great Exuma, where the boat is docked. Transport from the airport is \$20 per person. Boarding time is 4 P.M. Saturday. The boat is listed as 110 feet in length but that's only if you include the bowsprit and dive platform. Really about 96 feet. Cabins are extremely small and all your luggage goes in there. Pack minimally. My wife and I had a deluxe cabin (top deck) and the two daughters got the below deck cabin that shares shower and head. We first dove San Salvador for three days and the coral was in great shape, except for the overwhelming algae growth. The swim-through and grottos were impressive. Marine life was minimal. A shore excursion was offered to see where Columbus ostensibly first came ashore in the New World. Next we moved to Conception. Here the algae problem cleared up but the fish life did not materially improve. Two days later we traveled to Long Island, which held some pretty good Bahamas diving, absent swarms of fish. Friday we motored back to Stocking Island off Great Exuma and dove a tug wreck that was interesting. 27 dives are offered. Our fifteen-year-old daughter took her Advanced Open Water class on the trip and was enthralled with the instruction. It was indeed competent, knowledgeable, and extremely professional, as were the vast majority of the crew. The Captain is priceless, full of dry British humor. There is always someone to help you or dive with you. This was a good trip, a perfect family live-aboard vacation. Our eleven-year-old daughter was a bit apprehensive about spending a week on a boat but soon rolled right into it. Now both of

them are insisting on live-aboard vacations. The CEX accommodations are not quite up to Hughes or Aggressor standards, but you're paying much less. It offered more amenities than Blackbeard Cruises and the price differential is not that much removed. Remember, to the cost of the basic trip, you must add the fuel surcharge, port tax, transportation and dock charges. On balance, a fine and memorable trip.

Caribbean Explorer, August 2006, Ron and Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.

Experience: 450 dives. Vis: 90 to 120 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm and flat. Caribbean Explorer does it again! Great crew, great food and diving. Captain had great personality and talked with everyone. Small Southern Bahamas islands were great! Underwater, the reefs were outstanding and unique. San Salvador diving was excellent; almost everyone got to see lionfish! Third trip with Explorer Ventures; will continue to love their live-aboards!

Dolphin Dream, March 2006, Steven Rosenfeld (oceanstevenr@adelphia.net), Westlake Village, CA.

Experience: 1000 dives. Vis: 100 feet. Water: 73 to 75 F, choppy. I booked through Patric Douglas of Absolute Adventure. It was advertised as a 7-day trip to see sharks, including tiger sharks, dolphins and reef diving. The boat is docked in Palm Beach, Florida. At first sight the boat appears to need a little paint and TLC, but it is a smooth-riding vessel. She is an 85-foot converted shrimp trawler that is wide and heavy and built for open water. There are six cabins below deck. Each cabin has a full-size upper and lower bunk. There is no storage area in the cabins so you must live out of your bag. There are two full-size restrooms on the main deck. There is also a hot water shower on the dive

deck. One cabins has a queen-size bed for couples. The salon and eating area is large. There is plenty of room for everyone to eat at one time. Meals are served buffet style. The food was good and there was always plenty to eat. There were always snacks and drinks available. There is a TV with VCR/DVD and plenty of tapes to choose from. There is a large sun deck where we stored our dive gear. This is where the shark cage and a chase boat were stored. There was plenty of room. The tanks are filled in place on the dive platform. The platform is large enough for four or more divers. The dive ladder allows you to climb out with your gear on. We did all of our dives directly from the boat. The trip to the Bahamas took seven hours. Water and air this time of year can be cool. Water was 73-75 and at times the air was even cooler. I dove with a full 3/2 mm wet suit. Several people brought full 5 mm suits and were happy they did. Visibility was about 100 feet. On the first day we did a couple of reef dives. On the second day we started to chum for sharks. In no time we had a dozen 6-foot lemon sharks and one nurse shark that came up to the boat and followed us down to the cage. We dove in a group for safety. The area was only 20 feet deep and sandy bottom. Plenty of light for you photographers. The second day we dove this spot we had two tiger sharks come in and check us out. We did shark dives both in and out of the cage based on the conditions an experience of the divers. The fourth day we moved to a reef that was about 70 feet deep. After seeing a hammerhead shark and a couple of reef sharks, we took down some chum on the second dive. The Caribbean reef sharks immediately showed up. A tiger shark also came in for a look but kept his distance. On the last day the skipper

took us to open water and we snorkeled with spotted dolphins. The dolphins were amazing as they swam among us an eye to eye.

Juliet, October 2005, Frank Hall (hoosierdiver79@yahoo.com), Floyds Knobs, IN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 82 F, choppy, currents. This is our second time on the Juliet out of Miami. The crew is wonderful and will try to fill any request. We were supposed to go South to Cay Sal, but due to Hurricane Wilma we had to stay further North. We essentially ended up doing figure 8's around Bimini all week. It took us 7 hours to cross the Gulf Stream with rough seas. Needless to say there was some fish feeding going on! It was quite windy with a lot of strong currents. We saw considerable bleaching and algae growth. The crew put up the sails several times during the week that is really neat. The boat is in need of a little TLC. However, it is still a good deal, and you won't find a better crew.

Juliet, June 2006, Irene Lee, Eagle River, AK. (ilee@mtonline.net) Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. The Juliet is a 104-foot, 3-masted sailboat out of Miami. The route is to Bimini and then toward Cuba. Due to a tropical storm we dove off Bimini the first day and then went to Nassau, Andros Island, and Cat Cay. The diving was fantastic, with lots of wreck dives, deep wall dives, and a couple of incredible night dives with strong currents. Every day was hot and sunny and only the first day did we have overcast skies and some slight showers. The Juliet only takes 12 passengers and the service is personal. You get to know the crew quickly. Captain John is an experienced captain with a great crew. They

worked long days and always seemed happy to be there. The cabins are small, as is expected on a sailboat, but my husband and I never felt cramped. We only went to the cabin to change clothes or sleep. The bed was comfortable and the rocking of the sailboat during the night crossings rocked us all to sleep. It was the best night's sleep I'd had in months! Even the one night we had rough seas, the rocking motion was soothing. Nobody complained of seasickness, although we were all taking Bonine. Nitrox 32 is available for \$100 extra and the tanks are filled using a membrane. The tanks were always filled by the time the surface interval was over. Dive briefings were thorough, and pictures of unusual critters were passed around. There is a large hang bar at around 15 feet. Since we do several deep stops below this depth, we chose to do free ascents and never used the bar. The food was wonderful and plenty for seconds. Soda, water, and alcohol are included. Snacks available all day. There are showers downstairs by the cabins but most of us used the on deck shower between dives and at the end of the day. Plenty of hot water. Several of us had Hogarthian configurations of our gear including long hoses and backplate with wings. The crew was accepting of all technical looking gear and techniques. Two of the divers routinely dived with pony bottles on deeper wall dives. Minimum deco stops (DIR technique) with free ascents were OK. Every dive for us was about one hour and some were longer. No pressure to dive shorter times. The night dives were sometimes on sites that we had not dived. The currents were almost always strong on these sites. Usually just 4-6 of us who did the night dives. These were fantastic and challenging as the vessel only has one bright overhead light and

no hull lights. Excellent navigation skills are a must, as are good, strong lights. Fantastic trip. The Juliet sails in Turks and Caicos during the winter also. Be aware that you do not have dive masters leading you around; you need to have excellent navigation skills and confidence in your abilities. The dive masters will dive with you if you ask them, but only if their other duties permit. The expectation is that all divers are competent and able to plan and safely execute their own dives.

Nekton Pilot, June 2006, Lucie Offerle, Tucson, AZ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F. Dive restrictions: dive computers were checked randomly. The Pilot is showing its age. Although it is old and musty, it is still the best thing going – 5 dives a day, fantastic food and divemasters that took care of you. We did run into choppy weather that made exiting the water difficult. I was glad I was on the SWATH and not some of the other boats we saw.

Nekton Pilot, August 2006, Ralph Asher, Fort Collins, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm. I wish they didn't make us wait until 8 PM to board as I arrived in Ft. Lauderdale at 1 PM and had to loll around for 7 hours. When they did come to get us we were told that the A/C was not working and offered to a movie until it was repaired. We chose to wait on the upper deck. We were unimpressed at the look of the boat — it was in need of an exterior painting. This was probably a harbinger of things to come. They did get the A/C working after a couple hours and we were soon underway. The rooms are okay except that there were towels stuffed in the ceiling tiles to catch the water that would otherwise drip onto

the beds. Two rooms, including mine, did not have working speakers and my roommate missed two briefings since she couldn't hear the announcements. I told them this was unacceptable since we would be unable to hear an emergency announcement if one were to come but I was told that the owner had decided not to purchase the necessary parts. The room was comfortable enough and while the bathroom was cramped, it was okay. We lost the opportunity to swim with the dolphins the next morning when it was discovered that the starboard engine was not working and ended up riding for several hours and missing at least two dives. Happily it did get repaired and we didn't need to return to Ft. Lauderdale. Two days later we were informed that we could not use the toilets. This lasted about six hours and it was not fun using the one public head which was filled to overflowing. The Nekton boats carry too many divers. The galley is almost dingy and too crowded, and the small dive area just is not sufficient for the numbers. We had 32 divers and were bumping into each other constantly when trying to suit up. I didn't use Nitrox since no one else was using it and because it costs \$250 for the trip. The two dive sites where we stayed for a total of six dives were boring. They were listed as "wrecks" but were piles of debris and shallow with too much current. The novice divers liked it since there were so many fish but I lasted 15 minutes on each and got back on the boat. Between these boring sites and all the wasted time jockeying back and forth after those dolphins, I was only able to do 16 dives. The captain and the crew were fabulous. The food was average but was prepared well by a wonderful friendly lady. It was not her fault that she was not given better material to

work with. We did one dive on Theo's wreck that was at 100 feet depth and had many openings for penetration. I spent the first dive on the site deciding where to enter and couldn't wait for the return —wishing that I had a nitrox tank for the extra time it would allow. When I arrived on board I was appalled to learn that the rest of the divers didn't like the dive and insisted that the captain take them to where they could see fish. The captain saw I was disappointed and arranged to send me in a small skiff with two crew members for a two-mile trip back to the wreck that afternoon and I had the dive of my life. One of the crew penetrated with me at 75 feet and took a multitude of pictures as we went three rooms deep into the ship and finally exited through a small opening near the bottom at 100 feet. I ran my decompression time to the limit. I had never been more than a few feet into a wreck and this was more fun than I could have imagined. When we got to our 3 minute safety stop a remora played with us the entire time. I felt like a navy seal and it was my first experience diving from a small boat like this. I will be forever grateful to that captain and those crew members. On the way to a later site the captain spotted a pod of dolphins and again showed his flexibility. He got as many of us as desired into the water to snorkel with the beautiful animals and kept shepherding them to us. Then on the last day he took us to a site but the current was strong. He changed the dive to a drift dive and it was a wonderful final dive to the trip. I can't say enough for this captain, Big Daddy; he and his wonderful crew made what was otherwise a poor live-aboard experience into a dive trip I will not forget. I took my equipment in for its yearly maintenance when I got home and the technician

told me that he had found a strange type of corrosion, the kind of gunk one finds in dirty steel tanks. The Nekton used steel tanks.

Nekton Pilot, August 2006, Janet Hays (janet@tidemasters.net), Herndon, VA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm, surge. Biggest areas we've ever experienced on any live-aboard for staterooms, salon and sun deck. Particularly liked vanity in main cabin area and separation of toilet from the shower. Good variety, choice and quantity of food served buffet style. Especially noteworthy was Thanksgiving dinner. New additions to dive staff given inappropriate tasks like briefings on sites they weren't familiar with — inexcusable when compared with the excellent last briefing from Capt. Effey. Similarly, the after dinner educational presentation by veteran divemaster Matt on tunicates was superb; so why were we subjected to others who just read a prepared script aloud, and specifically instructed the guests not to ask him any questions? Operationally there were some serious missteps including use of a steel tank past service status containing rust. Once the divemaster guarding dive deck didn't keep the engineer from jumping into the water on top of divers trying to come in at the end of their dive. On another occasion one staff member was bringing skiff in preparation for leaving dive site when divers on the deck had to sound the alert that divers were still in the water. Two instances of mechanical difficulties including one in which owner of boat flew parts in by his private plane. Air conditioning in salon broken to the extent that carpet not only wet from condensation but the flooring underneath was buckling — computer and TV monitor for slide show overheating, fans not sufficient for

ventilation. Myriad of colorful tunicates sighted at Rocky Mountain High. Capt. Effey did an excellent job maneuvering boat during the dolphin experience, giving snorkelers great interactions with spotted dolphins. Fabulous close-ups of loggerhead turtles. Divemaster Chris did great job spotting octopus during night dive. UW Photography Comments: Camera table and air hose limited, area had to be passed through by all divers so was in no way secured from water sprays

Easy Goin, October 2005, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com), Golden Valley, MN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 110 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F, calm. We had originally planned a charter with this operation in December of 2004 and had traveled to Florida when we received a call from Captain Chuck, abruptly canceling the trip due to weather. We called Blackbeard's Adventures, and found out that both of the Blackbeard's Adventures dive boats were sailing to the Bimini area on the same day that the captain of the Easygoin, Chuck, canceled our trip. After much discussion with the captain about rescheduling the trip, we decided to charter with our credit in October of 2005. Any group traveling with him should have a clear and frank discussion, in advance, of the probability of trip cancellation for any given proposed month of travel. Captain Chuck and his partner Peggy live on this boat. It is reasonable to assume that he will be conservative in his estimates of what the boat, his only home, can handle regarding weather. The trip went well. The boat is quite comfortable, and Peggy is an excellent cook. The shark dive is done using only non-meat items, such as boiled eggs, to attract large groupers, and not to excite the sharks. There are plenty of sharks at that dive

site at all times, as it is the same shark dive site used by Blackbeard's adventures. There is plenty of fresh water on the boat. There are opportunities to fish and hunt lobster. All liquor should be purchased before departure. On the day of departure from the Bahamas to Miami, Captain Chuck was concerned about the weather and was reluctant to offer a morning dive and a walking tour of Bimini. He was able to be talked into doing both, however, which was fortunate for our group, since the Complete Angler bar has since burned down. The air compressor has a large capacity, and the boat is limited to six passengers. Service is therefore attentive and personal. The upper deck is a nice place to spend happy hour. The boat spends most evenings at anchor in Bimini chain of islands. All of the usual dive sites are available, and the diving is quite good.

Easy Goin, April 2006, Eric Dahlgren (e.dahlgren@comcast.net), Fort Collins, CO. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, choppy, currents. Like being with family. The boat is immaculate with lots of homey, personal touches. The 62' steel crew boat, which they converted themselves into a dive boat, is home for Captain Chuck Petrozella and First Mate Peg Schwallen. Divemaster Dave Shoemaker lives on the boat much of the time also. The boat is docked at the Bahia Mar marina in Fort Lauderdale about 20 minutes from the Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood Airport. They do weekend dives off Fort Lauderdale and Bimini, mini-and week trips to Bimini or Grand Turk, and Dolphin trips. The boat has an impressive array of safety and nav gear and Chuck invites guests to hang out in the wheelhouse and listen to his never-ending jokes and stories that had us in stitches. A thorough

safety briefing is given before leaving the dock for the 6-hour ride to Bimini, and safety is a priority. The boat holds six divers in three guest rooms below decks. Rooms have adequate space for two people once the gear is stowed. There is a single bunk above a smallish double bunk, but there is storage space at the head of each bed, under the lower bunk, and in a small cabinet. Divers share the head that also has a shower and sink. Though she was recovering from a double knee replacement, Peg managed to supply the hungry divers and crew with delicious, hearty meals. She got rave reviews, especially for her just-baked breads and desserts. She had fresh fruit waiting after dives and snacks anytime. Drinks, beer, and wine are included in the trip cost but any alcohol consumption means your diving day is done. Dive gear is stowed on the back deck in seats below the tanks and there is a bar with large hangers for drying wetsuits. A roomy dive platform is three steps down from the deck and it has a large ladder for easy reboarding after the dive. There is a warm water hose for rinsing off the salt and biodegradable soap for a nice shower under the stars after the last dive. A stairway lets you climb above the main salon to the small "Melanoma Deck" which has lounge chairs. Towels are provided for in-room use but bring your own deck towel. Most of our diving was drift diving on reefs in the 50-75' depth range. On several dives the current was a ripping 4-5 knots and we would drift a mile or more. Dave would tow a float and the divers would queue up at the end of the dive for the safety stop, then everyone would surface together. Only when all divers were on the surface in a small group would Chuck bring the boat in close and throw out a tag line so we could haul ourselves to the dive

platform. All of us used air at roughly the same rate. Other boats in the area with larger numbers of divers couldn't follow their groups in this manner so they generally had to anchor. This meant that their divers had to stay close to the boat and fight the currents. There was a lot of shark action on several of our dives, usually reef sharks but occasionally a nurse shark under a ledge. We often spotted hawksbill and loggerhead turtles, sting rays, lobsters, crabs, large barracuda, and the usual reef fishes (but not in huge numbers) and less often, small moray eels and garden eels. The reefs seemed to be generally in good shape with colorful hard and soft corals and lots of sponges. In one area, weedy algae covered much of the reef. Many areas have lots of cuts, crevasses, chimneys, and swim-throughs that make for interesting diving. The locals are allowed to take conch and lobster on hookah so we would sometimes see one "mother boat" surrounded by several smaller dinghies. Their divers would literally comb the reefs and sandy areas taking anything of commercial value. Even so, we saw large lobsters on every night dive, often protecting the eggs that were attached to their swimmerets, and conch were plentiful in the sandy areas. Blackbeard's and a couple other live-boards were in the area but we never saw other divers in the water. On the trip to Bimini after dark we watched bioluminescence trails from three dolphins that were riding our bow wave. We couldn't see them when they leaped out of the water, but the green sparks flew when they splashed back down. The Captain is willing to adjust the itinerary within reason to fit the desires of the group and the weather conditions. There is a \$65 Bahamas fee and the trip cost is \$1,525 pp double occupancy. With good weather, and

depending on your flight schedules, you can count on 20-25 dives. No separate camera table, no film processing, usual cable hookups to TV for video viewing.

ShearWater, January 2006, Walter Brenner (walt-brenner@hotmail.com), **Wayne, PA.** Experience: 1000 + dives.

Vis: 30 to 70 feet. Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures out of the Riviera Beach Marina, north of West Palm Beach, Florida. The Shearwater is a 60-foot vessel with accommodations for 12 divers (he usually takes only 10) in four tiny twin-berthed cabins and a quad.

Two heads with showers are shared by all. The salon/galley area is pretty cramped, with most available space taken by camera gear. These are trips for experienced U/W photographers. The crew of four includes a cook and Jim, himself. The food is not gourmet but quite tasty and plenty of it. The cook did an admirable job. The diving experience – sensational. The crew knocked themselves out to be sure we saw and interacted with as many sharks as possible. Rather than a lot of food in the water at one time (which they eat and then depart), they chummed with small bits and viscera so that the sharks stayed for many hours. There was action on the surface as well as underwater. One technique was to film the sharks from the dive platform (the camera held just under the surface), which got pretty exciting. At other times, we would hang from safety lines anywhere from 20 to 40 feet below the boat. Also, there was a lot of bottom action. We usually dove in groups of 5 so constant contact with the sharks could be maintained. This way we saw large numbers of these beautiful animals on every dive – tigers, bulls, reefers, lemons, and great hammerheads – literally in our faces. Diving usually started around 10 AM and lasted until

sunset. There was always at least one crew member in the water. Every one of the crew knowing exactly what to do almost as if it had been rehearsed. This kind of super efficiency comes from long experience, proper attitude, and intelligent application. In mid-January (the best time for hammerheads), the water and air temps were around 75 degrees, seas from choppy to dead calm, and the skies mostly sunny.

BELIZE

Belize Aggressor, February 2006, Steven Blair (smbclair@pacbell.net), **Danville, CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. The AC unit in my room was defective and the exhaust fan in the bathroom wasn't much better. I thought the area was stripped of most of the fish. More fish would congregate under the boat waiting for leftovers to be thrown overboard than could be seen on any of the walls or reefs. The diving couldn't have been easier, the captain invariably dropped us right at the edge of a wall, leaving divers the choice of a reef dive or deeper wall dive. Currents were all but nonexistent. The wall dives were good, just don't expect much other than corals. The crew was a pleasure to be with, probably the Belize Aggressor's greatest asset. The cabins are on the snug side.

Belize Aggressor III, April 2006, Timothy Kuhn, Milford, OH. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. The trip was good and the Aggressor fleet lived up to reputation. The crew was outstanding as was the Captain: did an excellent job. The vessel was in great shape, well-appointed, and comfortable. The dive deck was outstanding! — at last a setup where