

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

you were not elbow to elbow with the diver next to you: plenty of room and a nice 'locker' as well. Good sized camera table, but it lacked compressed air to blow off camera after dive. Just a word of caution: if at all possible, stay clear of cabins 2 and 3 . . . the wave noise can be quite loud. Definitely stay clear of cabin 1 though, the wave noise on the hull is really loud. Even in relatively calm waters at night, the noise from cabin 1 woke us up throughout the night. It sounds like a hammer on the hull! Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. This is an aluminum hull after all.

**Nekton Pilot, December 2005, Hilary Snitker (OreDen@aol.com), Vancouver, WA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 79 F, calm, surge. This was our first live- aboard. We arrived in Belize City late in the afternoon Saturday and were met by folks from the Nekton. We were taken to the Princess Hotel in Belize City and walked to a nearby café for dinner. We were picked up at 7:00 pm, crammed into a van (there were 13 of us), and taken to a supermarket to buy snacks, beer, soft drinks, and liquor if we wanted since the Nekton does not provide alcohol or soft drinks. After arriving at the Pilot, we had our pictures taken and were given name tags and room numbers. There were 14 divers (max of 32), and that our 14th diver would catch up with the boat the next day as his flight had mechanical problems and he couldn't get out of New York. After the muster drill, we congregated in the lounge and had a boat briefing, then it was off to bed. Sunday morning we woke to a hot breakfast at 7am and a dive briefing at 8am. This was to repeat daily until the Saturday morning. By 9am we were heading down to the dive deck to set up our gear and we were in the water by 9:30 for our first dive. We

dove 3x that first day, 4 dives Monday and Tuesday, and 2 dives Wednesday. Wednesday brought us a weather front that proved the wonderful design of the Nekton boats. The wind whipped up and we had about 10 foot seas at one point. The waves made diving impossible by 2:30 Wednesday, and we wound up lashing down the wetsuits and furniture on the sun deck to keep them from going overboard. The rain washed all of our gear down. The stability of the Pilot was the best part. I have motion sickness problems and wear a patch, and not once during this storm did I think I would have any problems (yes, I was wearing my patch). Everyone ate a wonderful lobster dinner and nobody on board got sick, but there were a lot of comments about the poor divers on the Sun Dancer II, pitching and yawing in a sickening manner. Thursday we woke up to sunshine, and although viz wasn't as good, we got 4 more great dives in (we don't night dive). Friday we got 3 dives in before it was time to break down and rinse our gear. We found the staff on both the Pilot and in the Nekton's Florida offices to be extremely professional and helpful from start to finish.

**Nekton Pilot, December 2005, Patrick Wikstrom (mrpat@brmemc.net), Warne, NC.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 35 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy, surge. Nekton vessels don't allow an afternoon embarkation or serve dinner the first night. We were picked up at the airport early in the afternoon and taken to the Princess Hotel and Casino. We cooled our heels until 8:00pm when we were finally picked up and driven to a grocery/convenience store to buy our booze for the trip. My group of six requested cabins on the upper deck. Lower cabins often have problems of cold air from the A/C on the metal

plate ceilings causing condensation droplets to dribble down onto diver's berths. 17 cabins can hold 34 divers. All normal utilities functioned as expected. The boat was clean and in reasonably good repair although some paint was rusting on the rails and some carpeting needed replacement. Food was plentiful although not particularly inspired. Basically a comfortable vessel the Pilot is really quite roomy despite its relatively short length. With a wide beam, and most of the engineering components in the submarine pontoons. They've got a lot of passenger space. Their unique elevating dive deck hangs off the stern, gear stays in place for the voyage. Their standard tank is the steel 95. 32% nitrox was pumped all week for a \$250 premium. Most dives are from the back of the mother ship, which limits you to those sites equipped with the giant mooring pins necessary to hold this high profile hunk of steel. The often mentioned smooth ride in rough seas is a fact; you hardly feel the "motion of the ocean." Capt. Ephey and his 10 man crew were personable, professional, fairly well organized, and genuinely interested in our having a safe and enjoyable trip. Lots of crew help on the dive deck. Divers were allowed to go their own way and long bottom times were the norm. With night dives and dawn dives many guests logged five or six dives a day. I did 21 dives with an average time of 58 minutes. Many dives ended with wonderful shallow reef tops or sandy sections of eel grass that allowed 90 minute bottom times. We started and ended our trip off Turneffe Island; none of those dives were stand outs. We spent the bulk of our voyage cruising back and forth between Half Moon and Long Caye in the Lighthouse Reef Atoll. "Silver Caves" is an exceptionally beautiful wall reminiscent of

Bloody Bay in Little Cayman. With a reef top of 25 to 30ft one can go deep, stay awhile, and plan to off gas for a half hour or so in safety stop land. Very healthy coral, fishy site. "Cathedral" is another beautiful site with high profile coral swimthroughs where late one afternoon I watched the mating dance of yellowheaded jawfish and a canoodling couple of indigo hamlets. On a dawn dive at "Dolphin Pass" we searched the sides of the wall as the night fish went to bed and the day fish woke up. Larry, a long time buddy, pissed off a pair of possibly amorous black grouper and got slammed in the chest for his coitus interruptions. Tremendous schools of fish that accumulate beneath the boat at almost every site. Huge groups of horse eyed jacks, Bermuda chub, grouper, wrasse, tangs, and other reef fish circle and swirl in the shadow of the ship. The vessel tends to swing back and forth in a long arc off its mooring line and divers either hold onto, or sit on top of, the rigid deco bar that hangs at 15 ft. One reason I picked this trip over is that they try to make it to Glovers Reef. Unfortunately on my visit the owners of a resort on Glovers had destroyed the Nekton moorings in an ill-conceived sense of reef ownership. Undaunted, we were offered a drift dive following a divemaster with a float ball. Everyone surfaces together and boards via a quick swim in small groups toward the stern once the Capt. cut the engines and the huge screws quit turning. The crew looked worried during these maneuvers and the wall was just a sandy slope that really wasn't worth the effort. "Aquarium," off Long Caye, had healthy hard and soft corals and more fish per gallon than anywhere else. Sgt. majors, chub, horse eye jacks, barracuda, big black grouper. In over thirty trips to various locations throughout the Carib-

bean I've rarely seen a location with as many of the Caribbean regulars, along with such a profusion of healthy reef structures. A week on the Nekton was \$300-\$450 cheaper than the Dancer and \$500-\$600 less than the Aggressor. UW Photography Comments: Camera table behind the lounge with air gun, large camera bucket on the dive deck, photo pro shot digital movie, sold DVDs.

**Nekton Pilot, January 2006, Grant Rowe (growe@nycap.rr.com), Niskayuna, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. Unfortunately, our week on the Nekton Pilot wasn't at a good choice. Strong winds, rain most of the week kept us hiding behind Lighthouse island and Half Moon Key as other *Undercurrent* reviews have mentioned. I didn't mind that since the option was to be out in quite high seas. That's the luck of the draw. We also had limited vis. After reading the reviews of the Pilot in *Undercurrent*, we made our reservations early and asked for rooms on the upper level. The person who took our reservations assigned us an upper level room and mentioned that the lower rooms did have condensation problems. To our surprise, when we arrived at the boat we found that we had been moved to a lower cabin, a room with a 2-foot diameter wet spot already formed on one bed. We protested but all they would do was apologize for the complete mess up of room assignments this week and give us a second lower level room. It also had condensation problems. We were offered \$50 on board credit as compensation but there wasn't anything to purchase other than chemical glow sticks. We settled for the \$50 video of the trip. In their defense, not all was bad. While the Nekton had bad weather, the Aggressor and Sun

Dancer, moored right next to us on Lighthouse reef for part of the week. The Nekton design did seem to reduce rocking in high seas. The crew made the best of a bad week. The food was great, the dive deck operated well and all crew were dedicated to our enjoyment and satisfaction. Good UWP setup. Computers and interfaces for download, CD burning, two nice camera tables. Rinse tanks at dive stairs and at camera tables.

**Nekton Pilot, February 2006, Steve Drake, Lexington, NE.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy. This was my fourth trip on the Nekton Pilot, and the second to the Central Belize area. The accommodations are adequate, although the boat is beginning to look tired. The food was excellent, and the service great. The diving in Belize is good, with excellent coral and sponge life. There are a lot of macro opportunities in particular. There were schooling horse-eye jacks at most mooring sites. Eagle rays were observed regularly, as were turtles. Two divers observed a hammerhead shark at 80 feet. We had a large pod of bottle-nose dolphins (estimated 50) cruise past the bow and stern of the boat about 15 feet away.

**Nekton Pilot, February 2006, David Baldwin, Burlington, WI.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, choppy. The boat needed repair and updating. The boat captain needs training in customer relations, the dive instructor was totally lacking in instruction and customer relations skills, the rest of the crew was helpful and friendly. The cook served good meals and snacks. The hot tub was broken. The Princess Hotel is a dump. Though steel nineties were used, they were filled to 2800psi. We 12 were crammed into a suburban with all lug-

gage and supplies — purchased locally beer, soda, snacks, etc. The diving was fair. If the boat would have had 30 divers instead of 12 divers the conditions would have been crowded. The weather was stormy the first few days and the captain did move the boat to calmer waters. The boat is stable and has easy enter-exit to and from the water. The crew will dive with you if requested.

**Nekton Pilot, March 2006, Cliff Lemmerhirt, Wapakoneta, OH.** Experience: 1683 dives. Vis: 70 to 100+ feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, calm and flat. I thought the dive sites were mediocre. The walls are nice, but I expected more. Grand Cayman is better diving. Food is excellent. Dive deck staff and crew are good. I thought the dive deck was crowded. The steel 95 cu. ft. tanks are great. Allow for long dives, average 1 hour and still able to come back with 1000 psi.

**Sun Dancer II, September 2005, Mildred Kirk, Davenport, FL.** I got certified on the September 17 trip. Sun Dancer II may cost a bit more but my fellow divers all had a great time. They treated us like royalty. After dive, hot showers, hot towels and goodies on the Lido deck. Gourmet food three means a day. Special attention from the chef to fix special meals for guests who had allergies, etc. Drinks — all kinds were always free. The transportation was waiting for us when we got off the plane with cold water and warm washcloths to freshen up. The Marriott Hotel welcomed us to stay until time to go aboard. Land tours can be arranged there as well. Ten staterooms — 20 guests — 10 staff.

**Sun Dancer II, September 2005, Kevin, Heath, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. The boat was gorgeous and well

equipped to accommodate a fun filled week out on the open seas. The food was plentiful and good throughout the entire week. While this was our first live-aboard trip, the rest of the passengers were seasoned veterans and had been on many exotic live-aboard destinations all over the world. The trip was a failure from a dive diversity standpoint due to the fact that the captain refused to move the ship around to various dive locations due to concerns of weather although the seas were absolutely calm! I feel the captain was fairly new to the area and the boat so he was in essence way overcautious given the great weather. The captain reduced the whole value of a live-aboard dive vessel down to a pathetic few dive sites.

**Sun Dancer, December 2005, Jerry Jensen (jensen\_jerry@hotmail.com), Eagle Point, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm. Great operation, great people, great food. The overall experience was outstanding. They treated us as adults with quality wine at dinner though night dives were scheduled. Peter Hughes runs an outstanding operation. .

**Sun Dancer II, March 2006, George Lock (glock@herc.com), West Grove, PA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, no currents. It's the quintessential Peter Hughes operation: good onshore booking staff, good boat crew, great food, and abundant amenities. This boat has 10 double cabins: two with queen beds, and eight with twin beds; all with private heads. The cabins are quite roomy by live aboard standards, and have individual AC control. The food is exceptionally good, and there's plenty of it. One can do 27 dives, if you choose: two each morning, two

each afternoon, and one each night after dinner. Most dives are wall dives with a 25 - 40 foot bottom between the mooring and the top of the wall. We spent most of the time in the vicinity of Lighthouse Reef. The group elected to skip the Blue Hole. Not many sightings of pelagic fish, and only a few sharks and dolphins. Lots of the "typical" Caribbean fish, sponges and corals, and a few turtle sightings occurred. It appeared to me that there had been some significant inshore swells, probably due to hurricane(s), since my previous visit in 2004. So there was some sand "dusting" the corals and sponges on the wall at some sites as a result. One unusual sight: sponges spawning on the last morning dive of the last day. The last night before we flew out Saturday, they tie up at the dock, understandably using fenders between the dock and the hull. But use of molded rubber fenders generates squealing/squeaking throughout the hull all night long, and if you're a light sleeper, you're going to hear it. For that reason, request a cabin on the port side of the boat. Crew provides a quick rinse in a segregated rinse tank as you exit the water. Camera towels and air gun provided at each of two camera tables.

**Sun Dancer, May 2006, Mary Ellen, Phoenix, AZ.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 85 F, calm, choppy. Great crew; most dive masters were enthusiastic. Weather was not cooperative but crew did the best they could. They even have turn-down service and hot beverage service to quarters in the morning. The last dive briefing was for the wrong dive site. Weather was such that the captain probably thought he was at the site next door. When we went down, current was so strong (not so on other dives), my buddy and I had to resurface and

so did another couple. Everyone else used 1500 psi to reach the mooring pin, hung out for about 5 minutes with nothing to see, then resurfaced. Nobody did the second dive. Great live-aboard. The dive facilities are marvelous, with plenty of room, although the boat was not full this trip. Cabins have plenty of room with private bath, king bed and nice, large picture window. Food was better than expected (Jerry is a great chef) and with good service. We really enjoyed the Chilean wine.

**Sun Dancer II, May 2006, Vick Thomas, Farmington, NM.** Experience: 352 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, no currents. No pre-trip information packet was sent. We were told "check our website, it's all there." The trip waiver was onerous and even excludes Peter Hughes from liability from intentional or gross acts of negligence. The AC malfunctioned in two staterooms and flooded one side of the diving room. The nitrox system completely broke mid-week. The mattresses and pillows were extremely hard; we felt like we were camping. There is no sign out and sign in for the divers. We were told, "if a tank is missing, we know someone is gone?" The food was substandard and the crew was aloof. Positives: spacious staterooms, spacious dive deck, not shower on the dive deck, spacious salon, and healthy reefs to include the corals, fish, and other marine life.

**Sun Dancer II, May 2006, Lynn Morton, Oakland, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 81 F, calm. This trip was our first Caribbean diving and first trip in a "chain" dive boat. I chose the Dancer because it had little to no dive restrictions and a ratio of 1 to 2 crew to passengers. There were no dive restrictions beyond the 130' limit, but

reality was different. Time was often limited because we rarely got into the water by the posted time of the 1st dive because the captain was still moving the boat. That meant the 2nd dive started late and since the boat was often moved at lunch, you had to be out of the water by a certain time. Ditto for the afternoon and evening. The 1st dive was scheduled to be at 8:30, which is late for a dive boat, and I never hit the water any earlier than 8:50. A slipping schedule with set end times made for restricted dive times. At the initial boat briefing, the following statement was made regarding drinking and diving: "The only restriction we have is if you've had so much to drink you can't find your way to the dive deck, you're not diving." Even if it were meant as a joke, they still didn't restrict drinking and diving. The crew was a real mixed bag. They gave you a shoulder massage when you came back aboard, but I'd rather they had gotten the tanks refilled. Divers frequently got set to go only to discover their tank was still empty. The promised crew to diver ratio wasn't there and it sorely showed when they had problems with the air compressor (no Nitrox on part of the trip) and the air conditioning. A quarter of the salon was flooded and had standing water that made for soggy rugs the entire trip. One couple's stateroom was torn apart for most of the trip with their effort to fix the problem. Lack of organization was evident at all levels. From embarking passengers missing forms from the main office, to missing dive times, down to missing my birthday. They were told by me, my husband, and again by him when we boarded, but claimed when the time came that no one told them. I'm old enough that I really don't care, but it made for a perfect example of the lack of organiza-

tion. Diving was probably pretty good by Caribbean standards. You always got in with a giant stride off the dive platform and swam back to the boat. They had an inflatable, but it was never used to ferry or pick up divers. Being our first time in the Caribbean, the lack of species diversity compared with the Pacific was hard to get past, but the sponges are beautiful. We dove mostly on Long Caye, a day at Half Moon Caye (the best diving), and 2 dives at Turneffe Atoll. We went to the Blue Hole, but I was forced to abort the dive. In the briefing, we were told that after snorkeling a distance from the boat, we all had to descend as a group. We had 2 minutes to get down to 130' and if you couldn't do it that fast, you had to abort the dive. Before we snorkeled over there, we all had to hang on a line together, being kicked and bumped. Then the pack moved off together. I was already uptight about being able to clear that rapidly, I hate crowds, it was a long snorkel and I'm dragging my camera gear, and I see ahead that they're already signaling for descent without all the divers being there. I pushed to get there too hard and got out of breath. That's never happened to me before. I nixed the dive. They say they do it for safety, but it was absurd. Later, they claimed that someone would have stayed back with me if I'd had problems clearing, but that was not what was said in the briefing. It was a prime example of cattle car diving with totally unnecessary restrictions. Our last day was supposed to be at the Elbow, but the captain refused to take us, saying there was too much current. The divers rebelled after the 1st dive was a total bust, so we went to the Elbow. There was no noticeable current. Then we went back to Belize City for the afternoon and the night, disembarking the next morning.

The boat sat at the dock all that time so they could restock for the next trip. We had to get off, taking all valuables, for the reloading until dinner. You could pay more to go on a guided tour to escape the boat reloading, but most of us hung out. Some passengers even paid for a room there that night, because the boat rubbing against the dock all night made incredible noises. We missed a half day of diving for that? The only camera tables were on the dive deck, subject to spray and dripping divers. Despite posted signs saying no drinks, both divers and crew routinely set drinks there. For protection at night or to open the housing, you had to go to your air-conditioned cabin. So you were constantly dealing with condensation in the housing due to the extreme temperature/humidity changes. The charging stations were also on the dive deck, 2 small shelves about 16 X16 inches. The crew used them for misc. items as well, and mixing hot drinks. Whenever the boat was moving, you had to remove everything to protect it from spray. Since no recharging in cabins was allowed (due to fire danger), which cut down on recharging time. There was a small space in the salon where you could also charge, but it was where everyone charged their computers and there was no room. Besides, one crew member was usually planted there working on a DVD to sell to the divers.

**Sun Dancer, July 2006, Gary Nagel (gnagel@wi.rr.com), Greenfield, WI.**  
Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm. Tropical depressions start in mid-June and can suspend silt in the water, cutting down the visibility. In these conditions a strobe is an absolute must. Lots and lots of back scatter without one. If you dive nitrox, only EAN 32 is available. They do have 2 analyzers, which was a

help since there were a lot of EAN divers and several who completed nitrox training. The "Dancer" and the Belize Aggressor do the same itinerary. They are seldom out of sight of each other. Although the Dancer is slightly larger, the Aggressor will get you to the same sites. Everyone referred to the Aggressor as the "party boat." Maybe I'll try that one next time. We had cabin #3. It's on the same level as the dive deck and far forward of the engine room. It has a large window with a drop down shade and gave us some great views. This is a quiet, comfortable room with enough storage and closet space for all your stuff. The room and private head were kept clean and orderly by the staff. The crew for the great part was super, especially the engineer. The food was mostly good but not gourmet. Beware of eating uncooked foods such as salads. Several guests missed dives because of intestinal difficulties. I pack my favorite tequila and I wish I'd have brought some vodka as well. They only had ½ bottle of vodka which was gone by mid-week. It's hard to make the girlfriend a vodka martini without the vodka. This is priced as a luxury vacation and excuses just won't do! For the most part, this was a great trip except for one crew member referred to as the camera pro. I never saw any pictures that he took. He never did any presentation and it's not like he didn't have the opportunity. His attitude was poor and he had no sense of humor. It seemed like he got in the way quite a bit on the camera tables. UW Photography Comments: Rinse tanks for cameras only, dual camera tables on each side of the dive deck. Batteries could be charged on the dive deck or in the salon. If you want to charge batteries in your cabin, bring a power strip with a circuit breaker.