

decompression dives are allowed. A 2.5 hour surface interval is done between all dives (on a two-day trip). Dive two is also at the West Bank, dive three may be at a deep water oil platform depending on conditions, and dives four and five are at the East Bank, with the last dive Saturday being a night dive. Saturday night the boats move to Stetson Banks that is about 70 miles offshore. Two dives Sunday are done at Stetson and then the boats head home for the 6-hour boat ride. The boats generally arrive at the dock by 5:30pm Sunday. There are permanent moorings at the Flower Gardens. The boats run a side line from the stern to the mooring line. Three down lines are lowered into the water with a regulator tied to one of them at 15'. A DM is always ready to jump into the chase boat to pickup divers who surface away from the boat. In February or March water temperatures is in the low 60's but the pay off is schooling hammerhead sharks. In the summer months the water warms up to the low 80s and you have the chance to see manta rays, eagle rays, turtles, and even the occasional whale shark. The viz can vary from 50' to as much as 150'. The viz and water temp at Stetson is usually a little less than at the West and East Banks. The currents can range from none to rip snorting. Surface conditions can range from flat seas to 4' - 5' waves. Diving an oil platform is a great experience because of the density of fish. Whereas the West and East Banks have the beautiful coral, Stetson Banks is completely different with clay and pinnacles. What makes Stetson special is the variety and density of marine life. Eels, scorpion fish, turtles, sharks, eagle rays, and small stuff like spotted drum, jawfish, and blennies. Dive trips of three days or longer include one or more night dives at Stetson Banks,

a world class dive. Each year on the 7th-9th night after the full moon in August one of the best coral spawns in the world occurs at the Flower Gardens. These are week long trips and must be booked well in advance.

Out to Sea Adventures, June 2006, Rusty Hubbarth (osohub@austin.rr.com), Austin, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 150 to 200 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. The best spearfishing trip I've ever gone on, with more fish, better Captain and crew, and better accommodations than I've encountered in over 250 dives. We left at 5:00 a.m. for a 50-mile ride out to the Baker rigs off the Texas coast. The boat, The "Orion," had ac, plenty of berth space, and was designed for divers. We tied off to a rig at the 50 fathom line, and proceeded, in buddy teams, to 130 ft. We saw, and shot, large Amberjacks, the biggest 62 lbs. We also got snapper, scamp, and barracuda. No sharks, but a large hawksbill turtle. Captain Mike Miglini, was extremely competent and helpful, but was very much a strict professional when it came to depth, remaining air, and proper decompression. After two tanks, we came inland to the double yellow rig t18 miles off the coast. This was our snapper and sheepshead dive, and we came close to filling the fish locker. We then headed into Port Aransas, where we got our fish cleaned.

VIRGIN ISLANDS, BRITISH

Cuan Law, May 2006, Captain Jim and Mary Jo Davis (Jdavis0001@comcast.net), Ponte Vedra Beach, FL. As dive instructors, we were pleased to see the first dive was a checkout dive that, in our opinion, should be mandatory for all divers except active, insured and cur-

rent dive professionals. Most reefs were, frankly boring. The coral did not look healthy. On 12 dives we saw a couple of nurse sharks, a couple of turtles, a few stingrays and only one large barracuda. Some sites did have a fair amount of juveniles, but limited in variety and number. There are good macro opportunities. The first night dive site was not conducive to a good night dive. The zodiac boat ride in choppy seas was unpleasant, the surge uncomfortable enough to have enough of the divers abort so that the rest did as well due to confusion. The dive leader could not be distinguished from other divers and tank lights were not required or worn by dive leaders. On one night dive the dive leader carried two lit torches. Two newly certified divers were taken on the RMS Rhone for their first night dive. Again, no tank lights, some current, one of them had problems getting their gear on while on the surface and never made the dive. Gearing up for each dive was time-consuming, as each diver was given his BC and tank and then had to wait, in neoprene until other divers were equipped and ready to board the Zodiacs for most of the dives. Weight pockets had to be removed after each dive. Not a major problem except for older BCs with time-consuming integrated weight systems. On a couple of occasions, tanks were not ready for the next dive though there were only 3 dives offered a day. Zodiac tender rides were generally short and can be hard on the back in rough seas. Only two day dives and one night dive is not enough for a dive live-aboard, particularly for divers who don't normally do night dives. The use of tenders limited dive opportunities. The crew is young, enthusiastic, and friendly, but with that comes a bit of horseplay (oftentimes including the Captain), which accounts

for some of the loud music and talking, heavy walking on the overhead, no one on the dive deck or available to help with fins on exit on the two boat dives. They do work hard and it was appreciated. No bad attitudes. We specifically asked for the quietest room available. Cabin #1 is not, with salon and dive deck speakers within 6 feet of the cabin door. Allowing passengers to plug Ipods into the vessel PA system is a bad idea. That's what headphones are for — so others don't listen to music that doesn't appeal to them or contains so much bass and drums to interfere with passengers' rest. We recommend the two forward, outboard cabins. All the meals and after-dive snacks were terrific, Nitrox available, drinks paid for by the glass or a weekly rate, excellent water toys and availability, shore picnic, great weather, warm water (ranged from 82 to 86 degrees), and 80-foot plus vis on most of the dives. Advanced divers may not be completely happy, particularly if they prefer more flexible diving. You can have a nice time sailing, diving and relaxing in the two hammocks on board and the comfortable salon. There is a roomy exclusive video room with DVD and VHS capability. When the sails are rigged, which you can help with, it is a beautiful vessel and trip overall.

Windjammer, August 2006, Dr. John L. Banks, Jr. (docjb10@hotmail.com), Amarillo, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to F, choppy, no currents. Windjammer advertises in the dive magazines and there have been articles in Sport Diving (the PADI publication). This ship carries 72 guest and is more of a cruise ship. I was assured that the vessel had an onboard dive operation and dive instructors of exceptional quality. However, upon boarding, we were told that they no longer had dive instruc-

tors because of problems with work permits in BVI. I was told that we could still dive with local dive operations. I had hoped for 5 days of 2 tank diving at a cost of \$80; instead, I got 2 days of 2 tank diving with a cost of \$110 per day. The dive operations were marginal at best and treated everyone as if they were doing one a favor just by allowing you to see their islands. This is a nice boat and wonderful crew for a different kind of cruise where you get to work

with the crew on a sailing vessel. But as a dive operation it is close to a total failure. I have done 15 live-aboards and many more land operations and these dive masters were without doubt the worst. In fact, this is the only time I can remember not tipping the dive masters.



PLANNING A TRIP?

Want to know the chances for good weather?
Good visibility? Calm seas? Warm weather?

Want to know what to expect at customs, where to stay before you reach the resort, potential airline problems, bug problems?

Want to know whether to expect big fish or few fish?
Bleached reefs or beautiful reefs?

Want to know whether the resort or liveaboard offers full support for photographers?

Want to know whether there is enough food? Vegetarian Food?
Fried food? Fresh food?

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