

UNITED STATES

Texas

MV Fling, August 2006, Paul Schmieder (pschmieder@sbcglobal.net), Bellville, TX. Experience: 157 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 86 F, calm and flat, no currents. This was my second successful dive trip out of four bookings, due to weather changes (sometimes abrupt) and debris (Katrina in 2005 caused cancellations). Board the boat by 8:30 PM on the night prior, claim a bunk – the Fling and Spree each hold 34 divers; we had 27 – eat, sleep and dive by 7 AM next morning. Since we're as much as 110 miles offshore, the dive and boat briefings are tedious, but necessarily thorough. We were treated to a dive on an oil rig, which was fantastic for the coral growth, small critters and schools of fish under the platform. The Flower Gardens East and West banks plus the Stetson Banks are small outcroppings; really, formations atop uplifted salt domes that are worth the effort. On a previous trip I saw a manta, but none this time, though a divemaster spotted 3 before guests entered the water. The crew did a good job.

MV Fling/MV Spree, August 2006, Larry Dewese, Tomball, TX. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. This is not a report about a single trip. I consider the Flower Gardens my back yard. I average at least 50 dives per year there. My last trip was Aug 3 - 6, 2006. The Flower Gardens is served by the M/V Spree and the M/V Fling. Both boats are owned and operated by Gulf Diving LLC. Figure out when you want to go and then go to the Gulf Diving web site and look at the calendars. There are links to the dive shops that are selling spots for each date. The boats begin

running trips in February on weekends only. As it gets closer to the summer months the schedule is generally Mon – Wed, Thur/Fri, and Sat/Sun. All trips board the night before the date shown on the calendar. Special trips are sprinkled through the schedule such as 4-day and week long trips. By October the sport trips are usually scaled back to weekends only. The M/V Fling and the M/V Spree are 100' converted offshore oil field boats. The boats are always clean and comfortable but do not expect Aggressor type accommodations. The sleeping quarters are bunk bed style. There are two fully functional heads and one "partial" head. The food is always plentiful and delicious and is served cafeteria style. The boats can accommodate up to 34 divers with a crew of 6. 32% nitrox is available from the on-board membrane system. The typical week end trip begins with a short dock briefing at 8:30pm on Friday evening. Passengers are then allowed to board the boat, claim a bunk, complete the necessary paper work and then bring on their dive gear and get it set up. The boats get underway by 9:30pm and head to the West Bank, approximately 110 miles offshore. The DM's wake up the customers at 6:00am and the first dive is at 7:00. All dives are done at specific times. Before the first dive a continental breakfast is provided. After the first dive a full hot breakfast is served. The first dive of the day is limited to 130' maximum and 100' maximum on all subsequent dives of the day. Divers violating this rule will have to sit out a dive. When divers return to the swim platform they must be able to take at least one breath from their regulator. Divers who run out of air are not allowed to dive for the rest of the trip. Divers are required to dive with a buddy and no planned

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-