

the stern. Windy conditions limited choice of dive sites; none more than 30 minutes from home. Some sites had good but typical reef fish and macro stuff. One site (Mingo) was in bad shape (dead coral dominates). Current can be an issue, but only sometimes. I went on four 2-tank trips and was treated well. Crew was flexible and accommodating to more experienced divers, but supervised and supported novice divers with due care and diligence. The dive operation was excellent, the dive sites were fair to good, and St John is a lovely place to pass the time if you're looking for a quiet scene with great food. (Try "The Balcony" in town, and "Asolare" (reservations a must) by Estate Lindholm — great "atmosphere" at both places).

## St. Thomas

**Underwater Safaris, September 2007, Don Winchester (DonWinchester@alltel.net), Mooresville, NC.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 75 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. Dove as a shore excursion from Disney Wonder cruise ship. Visited the Supermarket, with rows of coral-covered lava banks extending up from a sandy bottom. Vis was apparently down after currents pulled in the murk stirred up by a hurricane that crossed the southern Caribbean the previous week. Dive master explained the dive plan and rules and expectations in a humorous, effective manner. Fish count seemed a little disappointing. Second tank was on some collapsing WW II barges with interesting sea life and swim-throughs. The dive master led the group through the maze of the fire coral-covered superstructure and around the outside as small fish schools and critters alternately ducked out and then hid themselves

in the dark cavities. A small sea turtle let most of the divers cruise by before launching himself out of the depths of a cavity. A large blowfish came in to hide in the caverns and hung, motionless, watching through a rusty hole in the sheet steel. Small bucket for cameras. No camera table.

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## WIDER CARIBBEAN LIVE-BOARDS

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### THE BAHAMAS

**AquaCat, March 2007, Henry C. Campbell, Tacoma, WA.** Experience: 2065 dives. What a rip-off these people had. Dive trip for dive professionals, \$1,095.00. \$80.00 tax, boat charter, \$10.00 park fee + tip. Never say how much tip is. I have no problem giving a tip. Been on lots of trips; these people e-mailed back and said I had to pay \$300 tip because I canceled trip. Do they want tip before a Blackbeard Cruise too? Why dont they just say the trip is \$1,485? Said crew makes no money on these trips — really?

**AquaCat, May 2007, David Steinberg (djsteinb@easystreet.com), Portland, OR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 200 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, currents. The AquaCat is a 102-foot catamaran with a 35-foot beam and 6-foot draft. Commissioned in May 2001, it was built in Australia. There are 11 cabins for up to 30 passengers, each cabin having its own shower and head, A/C-climate controls and mini-refrigerator. No rust or mold was present anywhere and the entire boat had a feeling of daily polishing. With helpful assistance from Jesse, the house mouse, linens were changed as requested and

fresh towels available as needed. Three reverse osmosis desalinators keep a supply of fresh water, including the two hot water shower stalls on the dive deck. The dive deck has 24 roomy dive slots and 50/63/80/100 aluminum tanks available for any diver. Nitrox (32% only) was an additional \$100 for the five diving days. Tanks are filled after each dive while nested in your assigned slot. There are 4 points for entering the water. Two gates are directly on the dive deck. The other two points of entry are on the aft water level pontoons. Exit the water via these same lower platforms on diver-friendly ladder and crew assist. You even get fresh water hosing down right there. Janine, Max, Kat and Mike, are all instructors, (as are Captain Mark, first mate Desmond and chief engineer Pete). Our dive trip was in conjunction with a REEF (Reef Environmental Education Foundation) field survey and most of the divers were experienced and well-trained in fish identification. We also had the pleasure of Ned and Anna Deloach, world-renowned underwater photo/video researchers and Aqua Cat owner, Bruce Purdy. Bruce was concerned with the invasion of lionfish in the Bahamas and Exumas waters and actively hunted them for topside research. We were treated to a couple of the Deloach's slide shows at night. The food was exceptional, prepared by Chef Kirk Bell and his able assistant, sous chef Kelly. Breakfast always included something hot off the grill, pancakes or eggs, with bacon or sausage, and variety of fruits, yogurt, oatmeal and bread. Hot chocolate was a favorite and the entire case was depleted on the 6th day. Lunch was also something hot including a couple of fancy Mexican dishes. Dinner was always superb — beef dishes, pork loin, fish, and always a soup and

salad. You did not go hungry on this boat. The dive spots were spectacular and included the Exumas Land and Sea Park along with other notables such as Amberjack Reef, Shroud Wall, and Hammerhead Gulch. The corals all appeared healthy, with an abundance of fish including various species and sizes of the signature Nassau grouper. There were up to five dives per day including a night or dusk dive and two drift dives that were well timed. The feature dive was the shark dive (where all participants had to sign an additional waiver). What a show that was as the bait ball disappeared after about 20 minutes. The dive deck had 2 separate fresh water tanks for cameras and a dry table for equipment maintenance. There was ample power for battery chargers both on the dive deck and in the salon. The AquaCat had a film processing station on board.

**AquaCat, August 2007, Ronald L. Bailey (rlbailey@rbnet.com), Roanoke, VA.** Experience: 1350+ dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 84 to 87 F, calm and flat. The AquaCat is stable and well maintained. The crew was excellent. The food was good and plentiful. Cabins were cleaned every day and towels changed every other day. The dive deck was large and orderly and the camera table was easily reached. There were two camera rinse tanks. Cookies, fruits and other snacks were always available after dives. Tanks were filled to at least 2800 PSI. Nitrox available. The dive ladders were fin-friendly. Seriously encouraged divers/non-divers to participate in other activities such as fishing, snorkeling, and other beach activities. The reefs were generally healthy and on the only reef that had an algae problem, the captain moved to another reef rather than dive it twice. Also, the boat did not just pull up and dive each site twice as

most boats do; it would move to other sites more frequently. The shark dives were well run and interesting. Some of the reefs seemed to be lacking larger numbers of fish compared to other sites in the Bahamas. The first couple of dives were typical of the crew putting divers on shallow sites to see who could or could not dive. They should find better sites for those first couple of dives. On their drift dives, the process was for divers to jump in the water in a fast manner and go straight down, making it almost impossible to have a camera handed to you. Maybe they consider having divers hang on the tag line until all are in the water, making having a camera easily handed to divers. On the last morning, divers are expected to leave the boat by 9 A.M. During the hotter summertime, consider getting earlier flights out. Otherwise, you may have to put up with being uncomfortable until getting to the airport.

**AquaCat, September 2007, Rick Brohammer MD (Dr\_Brohammer@Bellsouth.net), Ft. Lauderdale, FL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 80 to 90 F, choppy. A most enjoyable live-aboard experience with excellent diving facilities and helpful, experienced crew. It was worth the price and there were no major complaints about anything. About 12 fellow divers were taking photos and no complaints.

**Blackbeard Cruises, April 2007, Paul Cahase (pchase@hughes.net), Walkerville, MI.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, calm. We were told it was a little cramped; that might have been an understatement. Wish I would have known the water temp before I left home; would have brought a warmer wetsuit. We have seen better corals in

other places. We dove the Gingerbread Grounds between Bimini and Freeport and thought it was some of the healthiest reefs we have seen anywhere. Fish life was abundant and bigger than the other places we have been. We did a shark feed; it was great, lasting maybe 10 to 12 minutes before one of the sharks broke the frozen chum in two and took off with it. One of the divers found a shark tooth after the dive was over. We saw three lion fish on the trip. They killed one and would have killed all if they could have. I know they are bad to have there, but I enjoyed seeing them. The staff were good at their jobs and friendly. Food ranged from really good to so-so. The staff caught and speared fish which we ate. UW Photography Comments: No camera table, 55 gallon barrel for a camera tank.

**Blackbeard's, Pirate's Lady, June 2007, Jesse H. Scott (jesse\_h\_scott@hotmail.com), Fuquay Varina, NC.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy. Second BB trip for me. They leave from Grand Bahamas. I (and my 16-person trip I lead) knew what to expect. Stayed near GB 1st 2 days in choppy, rainy conditions. As trip leader, we requested to 'head south' but was told cannot go due to weather. Around GB we dove the usual sites also offered by shore based operators so not much fun for those who have been to Bahamas before. Went to Gingerbread Grounds and Bimini next. Calm seas there. Much better dive sites. It seems that this is the standard routine for BB now based on Chapbook and other passenger comments. This will almost certainly be the end of groups I will take there. I recommend BB for first- or second-timers who understand what they are getting for the money (see their web site). However, they set the bar so high on my first trip

with them when shipping out of Miami and making long runs down the banks as far as Cat Cay that the current itineraries seem so-so. Captain and crew were personable. Meals were fine, as usual. Young dive master / site briefer was not so good and sometimes gave inaccurate directions around the sites. He needed more experience. No problems with the boat and facilities. Motored 95% of the trip. Choppy conditions near GB were unkind to seasick-prone. Bimini was much better. Chilly rain around GB required a jacket even in June. UW Photography Comments: Only a rinse bucket available on the sail boat. No outside wet table available. Table inside main galley. TV with A/V connections available. Power receptacles available for chargers.

**Caribbean Explorer I, February 2007, Tom Hoffman (tomhoffman@starband.net), Denver, IA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 90 F, calm. This was our 3rd live-aboard — 2 others with Blackbeards. I wanted to get a larger, more comfortable boat. The boat met all my expectations and then some. The warm water showers on the fan tail after diving to rinse off were wonderful. The accommodations were good and the service and care by the crew were first rate. I wanted to go to an area of the Bahamas further away with the belief that we would see more and larger fish; unfortunately, the opposite was the case. Many less and smaller was the case. A few sharks on a wall drift dive and that was all. The one notable exception was lion fish were seen on almost every dive. It was a pleasant trip and many good new friendships were made. The divers were a mixed group; all were over 40, some way over. Everyone was kind and helpful. The diving was disappointing. The wall coral was magnificent and

alive, the coral heads and many dive sites other than the walls, most corals were dead and a few small fish. Nothing big or in large numbers. Accommodations on Exuma are not much and poor service seems to abound. The one hotel in the main part of town is to be avoided.

**Caribbean Explorer I, March 2007, Henry Campbell, Tacoma, WA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy, surge, currents. Do not go in March or maybe earlier. Can not go to San Salvador. Afternoon dives poor: 30-40' bad vis. Water rough. Only 2 good dives in the morning, and some had a lot of current. They made a few pick-ups. Trip was OK but would not go back.

**Caribbean Explorer I, June 2007, Irene Lee (ilee@mtaonline.net), Eagle River, AK.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. We departed from George Town, Great Exuma in the Southern Bahamas and dived Conception Island, Long Island, and San Salvador Island. It was overcast many days but the diving was good and we had pretty much 100+ viz on most days. The wall dives off Conception Island were spectacular! There were swim throughs that started at around 45 feet and came out at 100 feet. Saw lots of big rays, barracudas the size of a house, and lots of schools of juvenile fish. Caribbean Reef sharks were everywhere on Shark Reef. Five dives a day and night dives every night after dinner. The crew was excellent and funny. The food was good and we all ate too much. Plenty of club soda for me since I dislike soda. The rooms were small but all our luggage fit under the bed and the beds were comfortable. The dive deck is large and we all had plenty of room to spread out. I love the big camera

table especially, since I was carrying my new video camera and lights. They provide camera towels, Q-tips, and an air hose to dry off the cameras. You also have the option of either going off the stern or off the 2 side-entry doors. The extra 4-foot drop is more fun than just stepping into the water from the stern. The rooms were serviced every day and turn down service happened during dinner every night. The air-conditioning is strong and I was glad I had a light weight hood to wear in the dining area. Clean and no musty smells anywhere. You board and take off your shoes and are not allowed to wear them again until you leave. So be sure to bring anti-fungal foot powder. You will may need it by mid-week. George Town there's nothing there. Glad we stayed in Miami overnight instead. Upon leaving George Town the security women don't know what batteries look like and made us pack our canister light batteries in checked baggage. They didn't believe that they were harmless batteries and got pretty rude, fast. Be aware that the dives start out on walls that are hundreds of feet deep and there is no shallow diving except for the shark dive, which was at around 35 feet, and maybe one other wall that had a shallow, 60 foot reef. The currents were mild and we really only had a stiff current on one or two dives as I recall (one of them during one of the night dives).

**Caribbean Explorer I, July 2007, John M. Davis (johnmdavis@comcast.com), Chattanooga, TN.** Experience: 400 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm and flat. Captain and crew worked as hard to assure that a good time was had by all. Zack, the cook, did an excellent job on meals and served homemade snacks between dives. Great deal in terms of the cost per dive. They go to San Salvador, Conception

Island and Long Island. The coral is in great shape on Conception and the wall diving is excellent. Not a lot of big fish other than Caribbean reef sharks, but lots of tropicals, as well as turtles, spotted morays, stingrays, lion fish and scorpionfish. The boat is one of the older in the fleet, but is expected to be dry-docked in September for repairs.

**Caribbean Explorer I, August 2007, Edwin L. Granite (egranite@aol.com), Chadds Ford, PA.** Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84F, calm and flat, mild currents. Great crew! Good food. Great skipper. Lousy diving! Much dead coral. Much algae on dead coral. A few good deep walls. Maybe I'm jaded from more than 40 years of diving, but this diving was disappointing.

**Juliet, April 2007, Edith Summey (summey11@aol.com), Carbondale, IL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. My dive buddy, Rosemary, and I met at the Miami Airport and headed to the Miami Beach Carriage House Condos where we relaxed for two nights, enjoyed the facilities, dined at Nexxt in South Beach, and rearranged our gear. On Saturday we took a cab to the Bayside Marina where we boarded the Juliet sailing sloop with 8 other divers bound for the Bahamas and a dive adventure. We settled into our spacious, air conditioned cabin, number 6, and stowed our dive gear on deck in covered boxes and arranging our BCs on a tank. Our cabin had a double bed with a single bunk above. There was room for a cushioned chair, bookshelf, desk, laboratory, drawers, cabinets, and closed closets, too. There was plenty of space under the beds and desk to stow the luggage and if needed luggage could also be put in another

room on the boat. There were two marine heads on the lower level for guests and a full sized shower. The hot water shower on the deck could be used after dives to eliminate needing the one below. Towels and washcloths were in the cabins and towels were also available on deck. The salon was on the main deck. It was small, but contained a table with benches arranged in a C configuration around it facing the video monitor where presentations were made. A center counter provided space for buffet service of meals. Another bench lined the other side of the salon and provided further seating. The wheel house was on the front side of the salon, while the galley was behind. This area could be air conditioned although during this season it was not necessary. Deck rails were used for drying dive suits and towels which were secured with clothes pins. There were two barrels of water, one for cameras and the other for rinsing masks or gear. The hand-held shower offered hot and cold fresh water. BCs and tanks were lined up on a center shelf with bracket clamps and a ring and clip system to hold them. During travel, a rope around the entire collection of set-ups held them firm. Divers could back up to their gear, clip it on, and be ready to dive off the boat with a giant stride from a platform that was attached to the port center side. A ladder reaching down to the water from the platform was the method of exit from the water. This placement minimized boat movement that is associated with ladders at the rear of the boat. A tag line was also trailed from the ladder to allow divers to take off fins prior to ascending the ladder. A line to the bow also was placed to give divers assistance to reach the mooring line in the event of dives on a wreck or in current. A deco bar with an extra air source was

hung at 15 feet below the boat. The Juliet crew was helpful and flexible when asked for special assistance. They lowered a line with a clip so that I was able to attach my camera equipment prior to exiting the water and have it hauled aboard. Nitrox was available for those divers certified to use it. The crew was good about providing good fills. They were cheerful, agreeable, and pleasant. They put up the sails several times and involved the divers in that process. During some rough seas, they handled the ship with expertise and confidence. The orientation was thorough and covered all aspects of safety. They were able to adjust the schedule to meet the challenges of the weather so that we had good diving by making changes. Instead of the usual route, our destination became Andros Island, Nassau, and return through the Gingerbread Grounds. We got to do some interesting dives as a result although the vis was less than perfect due to the turbidity caused by the weather. The food on the Juliet was exceptional. There were plenty of snacks and the meals were filling and tasty. There was an ice maker, sodas, and even beer were included. Cold water and cold flavored drink were always available in addition to other options. Guests were given Juliet water bottles with their names taped on each to help keep them hydrated. We had a plenty of laughter, jokes, exchanges of stories, and development of friendships. The divers who had not met before the trip were quite congenial and harmonious during the trip resulting in a happy group. The owner, John Beltramo, and Captain Brandon Ault provided a tone of warmth and welcome that made us all happy to be part of a spirit of adventure and fun. We returned to the dock at Bayside Marina in front of the Hard Rock Cafe on Friday morning. After

inspection by US immigration and customs, we took a cab back to Miami Beach. For other trip reports, and photo albums thereof, check out my web page: <http://e-diver.spaces.live>.

**Juliet, June 2007, Frank Evans (frank-evans@charter.net), Rochester, MN.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, no currents. My first live-aboard dive trip. The 104-foot three-mast sail/diesel-powered boat hosts 12 total divers and a fantastic crew of five friendly and knowledgeable staff led by Captain John, who makes sure everything runs smoothly. Made new friends, enjoyed diving new and exciting sites in the Bimini area, and saw my first manta ray, lionfish, and one tiger shark. Biologist Danielle added great info on various fish as well as coral. Dives varied from a couple of drift dives, wrecks, giant coral heads, and Krispy Kreme, one of the most spectacular wall dives I've ever done (saw the tiger shark). Captain John runs a class operation and can adjust the schedule when Tropical Depression Barry delayed our crossing from Miami (where Juliet picks up guests) to the Bahamas. Instead of leaving the night of our arrival onboard (Saturday), we stayed on the boat in Miami and dived three wreck sites off Miami Beach the next day. Viz was poor but the diving was ok, with little current. Two Tanks is an unusual dive site with two Abrams tanks facing each other and a large rock pile in between. It was full of reef critters. When it was safe to sail to the Bahamas, we agreed to scrub the night dive and headed east. After clearing customs in the early morning, we were diving by 9:30 and did four dives a day — three day and one night — until Thursday, when we did three day dives and headed back to Miami. My favorite dive sites included

Bimini Strip, a small patch coral just off shore but full of life. We did it as an afternoon and later as a night dive and both times it was different. We did the same thing on the Hesperus Wreck, which sits in only 17 feet of water but is host to countless large sting rays, loggerhead turtles, a lionfish, and large schools of fish including ocean triggerfish. Night dive viz was only 15-20 feet but it was still a fantastic dive with so much to see. The diving ended at a site called Bull Run, famous for its large number of reef sharks and a "pet" grouper named Lucky. Only negative was the algae growth on several reefs. The food was plentiful and balanced, with Aleca (cook) topping off dinners with fantastic desserts. Dive master Greg gives informative briefings and chief mechanic/captain Brandon is always helpful and entertaining. Everyone on board got along incredibly well, even though most were strangers at start of trip.

**Nekton Pilot, August 2007, William Ungerman (Elitecorps@aol.com), Santa Ana, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 90 F, calm, currents, no currents. Departs from Fort Lauderdale. They will pick you up from any location on the day of departure but you cannot board the boat until 8 p.m., which makes it real late to get anything done. The overnight passage is to Bimini, where Bahamian customs matters are handled by the crew while you dive. Five dives a day were offered on three of the six dive days; otherwise four. Two dive sites a day was the norm. The diving was mediocre with the exception of a few sites, e.g., Theo's Wreck off Grand Bahama and the Sugae Wreck, where marine life was prolific. Lots of sharks on Shark Junction, where some land operations do their shark feed dive. We

found the crew to be the absolute best on any of the thirteen live-boards we have been on. The cabins are relatively spacious. We felt the policy of setting the clocks back an hour (“Nekton Time”) to be pointless other than to create the illusion of getting in the night dive at a reasonable hour. Having a nightly PowerPoint presentation on reef creatures or turtles is fine, but do it after the night dive. The dive briefings were excellent and the crew would do anything you asked and at times it was like having your personal valet. The trip video produced by “Divin’ Ivan” was the best ever seen. My family of four has seen better diving but never a better crew or atmosphere; a great time was had by all. Dive table and air hose available, also rinse barrel.

**R/V Coral Reef II, October 2006, Lloyd Schwengel (swendiver@aol.com), Brea, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, no currents. This was my 5th trip with the New England Aquarium on the RV Coral Reef II. It is a collection trip so not oriented towards U/W photo. The rooms are small but adequate and bath facilities generally shared except one room. Food is excellent and plentiful. You are expected to help out with some of the chores on board since only three crew, two captains and a chef. They supply collecting equipment, two nets, catch bag and probe stick. Short demo on collecting. Helps to have experienced ones along. Sites are picked for types of fish or inverts to be collected and weather. A lot of camaraderie develops among the participants. The swim step has two ladders for easy exit. Most sites shallow for easy collecting, with little or no current. The boat has several tanks to keep the collected fish in, which doesn't make for a lot of room but does not

seem crowded. There are the crew, three aquarium divers, and 9 others. Equipment is kept under two hanging tables and tanks in a box on each side. Entry and exit are from the rear swim step via stairs. One sits out as safety observer each dive. Usually a few beach seines for small juvenile fish, along with a visit to Alicetown one evening. Last day back at Miami is packing day. Everyone works hard this day to prepare, package, and ship the animals to Boston. There is oxygen and safety equipment on board and two outboard inflatables for that wayward diver, although seldom needed. Only a few mild currents and shallow sites. You have to know fish ID and habits to really help collect. UW Photography Comments: U/W photo is only a side activity. Few facilities, are able to charge bats, rinse tank and air available. Keep equipment in your room. You can get some good photos on a few dives.

## BELIZE

**Belize Aggressor III, September 2007, Lisa Vitale (ldvital@yahoo.com), Austin, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm, no currents. Fantastic trip! On Saturday we were met at the airport by one of the divemasters. The ride to the boat took about 30 minutes through Belize City. We had two divers whose flight was canceled and were to be in the next day and brought to the boat by water taxi. If an airline has more than one flight per day, there is a chance the second will be canceled. The cabins are fairly spacious, with a double bed with a twin bed bunk and a private bath. Two drawers to store clothes and room under the sink to store toiletries as well as a space under the bed to store some smaller luggage