

the shadow underneath the boat. One previous writer also complained about squeaking of the bumpers, which are placed between the boat and the dock, during the last night on board. Our cabin was on the starboard side, right by the dock, and we heard no squeaking at all, so this problem also appears to have been fixed. The cabins are large and well laid-out. A/C in the cabin was easily adjusted to our tastes. Temperature in the main salon was kept colder than we like, so bring a jacket and long pants if you get cold easily. The price is higher than many other live-boards, but well worth it. Bring along a copy of the onerous release forms you have to fill out and send in. These forms are not forwarded to the boat, so we had to fill out most of the forms again. There are two large camera tables with compressed air, separate rinse tanks, and plenty of outlets for recharging. Computer facilities for digital viewing and editing appeared more than adequate.

## CAYMAN ISLANDS

**Caribbean Explorer II, November 2006, George Boscoe (fleetwood7@comcast.net), Orinda, CA.** Thanks for the recommendation of CEXII for my first live-aboard. The experience was outstanding. The boat was well run, safe and clean. The food was outstanding, tasty and well prepared. The crew was very professional and safety conscious. The accommodations were clean, if a bit cramped. They do add on a few hundred dollars for marine park fees and fuel surcharges, a video(optional) and I think they could just include them in the base price. The diving was great, lots of marine life of good variety; the water was murkier

than I had seen in the Caymans last year but still able to get good pictures. The agency US Dive Travel required notarized releases and demanded the use of cashier's checks for payment. Only after I got on the boat did I find out I could have booked directly through Explorer ventures and avoided this hassle.

**Cayman Aggressor IV, December 2006, Jeanette Jackson (JJProperties@nc.rr.com), Raleigh, NC.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 75 to 79 F, choppy. We had to dive only on Grand Cayman because of the weather, but the crew made it so much fun you almost didn't mind not making it to Little Cayman. Captain Sam gave great dive briefings. Shaunah was the camera pro, and also very helpful with anything you needed. Shawn was a great divemaster — very easy going and fun. Yanis made wonderful food for us — lots of it! There were only seven guests on the boat, so we got spoiled having the whole boat to ourselves. The soda machine was not working and they did not provide sodas. I think they either should have purchased sodas to have on board, or let us purchase them on the way to the boat. Warning: The steps down to the diving platform and the staterooms are very narrow (about 1/2 normal size), so you must be very careful. We had some pretty nice dive sites for not getting to leave Grand Cayman. We were glad we were in a location that could still provide diving during bad weather — instead of being blown out completely and having to twiddle your toes for a week.

**Cayman Aggressor, March 2007, Rainer and Kristin Farrag, Dundee, IL.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy, surge. We were on Capt. Sam's last voyage. He is not people-friendly and was avoided

whenever possible. Fortunately, Capt. Phil was also there and is professional and friendly. The rest of the crew was really great — Jon, especially, was approachable and truly did everything to help us have a good time. Aside from the pall of Capt. Sam, we were not impressed with the diving. Because of weather, it was not possible to leave Grand Cayman, and the diving around Grand Cayman was horrible! We couldn't even make it to Sting Ray City (we suspected this was not weather-related at all, but some bug up Sam's butt). We had a wonderful group of divers on board — all lovely people.

**Cayman Aggressor, June 2007, Grace Hampton.** At 8:30 p.m. we were welcomed on board, taken to our cabins, fed a delicious dinner, and Captain Phil delayed his orientation until the following morning. And less than 12 hours after our arrival at the boat, we were in the water for the first dive. Chuck and Terry brought along an original fish identifying game with charts and pictures. We all participated all week and proved once again that he who dives the most sees the most. Chuck Brown is champion fish-finder. We all saw friendly turtles, shy turtles, eagle rays, angel fish, and the rest of those reef creatures we enjoy so much. The only time we did not see specific fish was the day they appeared on our fish finding chart. Weather kept the boat on Grand Cayman all week but we did get to dive the east end where the walls are deep and beautiful. Tarpon Alley let us experience swimming in a school of several hundred big fish. Sting Ray City was as advertised except there were fewer rays than we had seen 2 years ago and they have become more aggressive. John Tribe got the stingray hickey award when he pulled off his dive skins back on deck and revealed a bruised upper

arm. Craig Masters and Steve Spragins received hand injuries. And a few others were nibbled. Back on the boat, we worked out the live-aboard routine: sleep, eat, dive, eat, dive, eat, dive, eat, dive, sleep, until we worked our way through 5 possible dives a day. (Chuck made them all.) The Cayman Aggressor is a good dive boat. The crew were helpful, friendly, and worked hard to make certain we had a good dive week. Several of us needed assistance getting tanks and gear to the dive deck and us into the water. The team working on deck anticipated our needs, patiently waited for us to get ready and helped us in and out of the water. Hot shower and hot towels were provided right on the dive deck when we concluded each dive. Food was plentiful and delicious. Yanis, the cook, served 3 full meals and 2 snacks daily. She also carefully catered to personal allergies and special diets with a big smile. Friday, after our two dives of the morning we docked at Georgetown and went ashore. The rain and drizzle made it difficult to dry our gear and pack, but we managed. Then out to dinner Friday night when the rain really poured. But Saturday was bright and sunny and we headed off to the airport for another dreaded travel day.

**Cayman Aggressor IV, August 2007, Paul O'Connor (ocpaul@aol.com), Canton, OH.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm. The boat was almost full (14/18) and the group was varied, but fun to be with. The boat appeared to be in excellent condition, and in spite of normal daily repairs that seem to be required on any oceangoing boat, there were no mechanical problems that caused any interruption of diving or loss of service. Capt. Alan Roberts was on board this week, apparently due

to termination of a prior captain. Alan is a wonderful, knowledgeable captain. The crew was well-oiled and extremely helpful. The food was plentiful and well prepared and presented. We were given a choice of staying near GC for our first day of diving or making the crossing to LC so we could dive there the first day. We took the southern route around GC, which provided some protection from the storms to the North, and the passage was actually not bad. We spent most of our time at LC and it seems like we dived most of the sites on Bloody Bay Wall, most sites at least 2 times and sometimes 3 times. Night dives were available every night except the last night before heading back to GC. We also continued over to CB one evening for a couple of morning dives on the Keith Tibbetts. All in all, the diving was excellent, with plenty of sharks, turtles, stingrays, yellow rays, eels and the resident Nassau groupers. Plenty of small stuff too. The dive deck head was refurbished just prior to this trip, and that made changing of bathing suits before entering the interior of the boat a non-issue. Dive deck hot showers with soap were welcome — I didn't need to use the en-suite shower once during the trip. Prior reviewers have complained that the boat does not regularly make the crossing to LC. I don't believe this is true — the boat logs seem to indicate that the crossing is made at least 80%, and maybe closer to 90% of the trips. I woke the last morning with a knee that was aching. I knew that I had not done anything mechanically, so I was concerned about DCS. I expressed my concern to Capt. Alan and he immediately suggested O<sub>2</sub> treatment. Since I did get some relief of the pain after the O<sub>2</sub> treatment, DCS did seem to be indicated. Capt. Alan contacted DAN on my behalf, and I ended up making a

2-1/2 hour Table 5 chamber ride at the George Town hospital with complete relief a few hours after the treatment.

### **Nekton Rorqual, September 2006,**

**John Konnak, Ann Arbor, MI.** Experience: 273 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 86 to 87 F, calm and flat. Nekton boats are very well designed for diving. Reefs in national parks are very good; other locations less so. Great food. Divers are coddled. Divers must provide their own beer and soft drinks.

### **Nekton Rorqual, October 2006, Patricia del a Sota, Vienna, VA.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm, no currents. There were only 13 divers (out of a possible 26) so there was even more room than usual on this already spacious boat! The dive platform is well-configured — very easy off and on. A dive master had to read the tanks' nitrox levels before each dive (on other trips, we were responsible for measuring our own nitrox levels), which meant you sometimes waited a few moments until they came around to you with the indicator. The large steel tanks they use are quite negative (heavy) so you wear less weight; they can cause you to "roll" to either side if not kept balanced. The food was awesome — flavorful, varied and plentiful. The crew was great — cheerful and helpful at all times. They were very organized — from pickup at the Sunset House to dropoff at the airport. The diving was OK, just OK. I don't think I am seeing the vibrancy of life that I saw when I started diving 20 years ago. (Am I becoming jaded?) The boat is showing her age a bit but everything worked as advertised. The dive site briefings and drawings were poor. One crew member would draw the site and then another crew member would erase it and draw it all over again. They frequently were

clueless as to where the mooring was in relation to the reef! The crew had been diving these sites for a while but except for one or two crew members, most did not seem able to properly describe or draw a site. All in all, it was a very good, relaxing trip.

**Nekton Rorqual, January 2007, Bill Dausses (bill@dausses.org), Bartlesville, OK.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 110 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. Our group wanted to compare the three Cayman Islands for the quality of diving and we weren't disappointed. This was a fun cruise and the crew was great. Nelson, the captain, went out of his way to find the better sites on each island and provided much flexibility in site selection. We were anchored on the northwest side of Grand Cayman New Year's Eve. Nelson accommodated everyone by opening the dive deck at 11:30 pm, and everyone gathered at the u-bolt on the reef at midnight for welcoming in the New Year. Nelson met me on the ladder when I surfaced with a glass of champagne on a silver platter. We were also treated to a great fireworks show by the islanders on Grand Cayman after the dive. On Grand Cayman we did the west wall, the north wall and sites in-between. It is pretty obvious the west beach sites are stressed from the tropical storms and heavy diver traffic. Still, there was a good variety of tropicals, grouper, stingrays, lobsters and other critters. The north wall is much more colorful and looks good with corals in good condition and much more populous. Little Cayman was a dive paradise by comparison. All of the diving was done in Bloody Bay and Jackson Bay sites. Many sites were in excellent condition, contained abundant fish life including several varieties of grouper, sharks, stingrays, spotted eagle rays, turtles,

lobsters, eels and other small critters. Cleaning stations were everywhere and a friendly Nassau grouper named Jerry followed us on several adjacent buoys and was just like a puppy dog. Little Cayman is not immune to coral problems, however; as Jackson's Reef was in bad shape, probably because of its position in an elbow of the main reef, high summer water temps, and lack of circulation. Still, we did watch a spotted eagle ray cruise through along with a pod of dolphins. Cayman Brac was almost as good as Little Cayman. Tarpon joined the list along with several more eels, turtles, rays, and a goliath grouper. And of course, the Russian Destroyer, the Keith Tibbetts, was as photogenic as ever, and getting better with age. The wreck has been prepared especially for divers and penetrations are allowed since there is little silting, lack of sharp protruding debris, and wide passages with good light for exits. The Nekton Rorqual has aged some but it is in good condition and well-maintained by the crew. The food was always plentiful and good-tasting. Rooms were nice and cool and the showers hot. Crew was fun, attentive, and great to accommodate anyone's needs. Steel 95 tanks allow for really long dives and less lead on your belt, and on nitrox, several of mine broke 75 minutes. In fact, out of 26 dives, only four were less than an hour. Rinse tanks on dive deck to hold equipment. Equipment is handed to you once you are in the water and ready. It is hand picked up on your return to the boat. Above the dive deck is a spacious table for storing and working on equipment.

**Nekton Rorqual, July 2007, Bobby Herman (riherman@aol.com), Sammamish, WA.** Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: calm, no currents. Staff was amazing and nice to

dive with. Dive briefings were thorough, and once the dive deck was open, you could dive at your own leisure. No pressure or having to go with a guide. Staff was available and willing to dive with you if your buddy wasn't interested in taking a dive with you. Boat was comfortable and stable. We didn't have to go ashore midweek as refueling protocols had changed. A great value. Would not do this itinerary again, however, as the scenery in Grand Cayman wasn't as spectacular as I had hoped. Little Cayman and Brac were much better. Photography facilities were fine, with separate rinse tanks and a crew that was accommodating. Was on a small trip (less than half full) so there was plenty of space. Electrical outlets would have been an issue for charging batteries with a larger complement of guests.

## DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

**Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, March 2007, Bill Shepherd (Chorsejbs@aol.com), Satellite Beach, FL.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. The experience of a lifetime — snorkeling with whales — Humpback whales in this case, at the Silver Banks off the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. Not an experience for the beginner as tracking a mother and her calf for 1-2 hours in an often turbulent ocean prior to a 10- to 30-minute encounter isn't everyone's "cup of tea." But well worth the effort for one who loves the sea and all its creatures and is seeking the ultimate encounter. Captain Piers and the crew of the Turks and Caicos Aggressor II provide the consummate environment for such an adventure. knowledgeable and environmentally savvy, they edu-

cate you on the humpbacks and their station in the ocean and provide an opportunity to interact with them. The divemasters help get you into position to interact with the whales and ensure that you don't interfere with their actions. The boat is a top-of-the-line live-aboard with ample space in the cabins, good facilities for the photographer/videographer, good and plentiful meals, and dependable skiffs to get you to and from the whale encounters. Evenings were highlighted with slide shows and educational talks about the whales and their activities while in the Silver Banks area. UW Photography Comments: Large camera table on dive deck. Also sufficient charging stations to accommodate everyone's needs.

## HONDURAS

**Utila Aggressor, February 2007, Gary W Brown (gkbrown@vci.net), Benton, KY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, choppy. We just got back from a wonderful week of diving aboard the Utila Aggressor. The weather was warm and sunny and the seas were fairly calm. Only a couple of sites had any current and it was moderate. The dive operation is first rate, with great briefings and easy access to the water and equipment. Our room was large enough for two and well maintained every day by the staff. We had three great meals per day with lots of snacks and plenty of soft drinks available. The meals consist of soups, salads, main course, and dessert every evening. We were offered a night dive every night as well as four dives on most days. We were able to snorkel with a group of pilot whales one day and swam with dolphins another day. The reefs were in good condition with plenty of fish and small critters to view.