

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.

Our group was from Mermet Springs in southern Illinois. You could not ask for better service from the crew. It is a nice trip.

Utila Aggressor, February 2007, Ed Heimiller (heimiller@att.net), Streamwood, IL. Experience: 2000+ dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm and flat. After arriving at the airport, I was met by the Aggressor representative, only to find out that we would have at least another 2-hour wait until other divers arrived on later flights, even though I was told and the literature said we should be in around noon. We had to argue with the representative to at least take the luggage so we could walk around. When we finally did leave, the two-and-a-half-hour bus trip ended up to be three to three-and-a-half hours long. After we got our luggage onboard, we had dinner, buffet-style, and then a short welcome briefing. After the briefing we then went about setting up our dive gear at any dive station we choose. The wet suits hang up right above the stations. In my stateroom I found the shower leaking, the sink faucet dripping and a large bug coming out of the vent above the toilet. I was awakened at 11:00 PM by another coming aboard who was sharing my room. The next morning the cold breakfast was at 6:30 AM and the hot breakfast was at 7:00 AM with the first dive at 8:00 AM. The first dive was to be a check out dive (weighting) at Toon Town. The briefing consisted of a drawing of the site, explanation of deck procedures and a short narrative regarding the site. Depth limit was 110 feet and that there would be only one briefing per site. One thing missing at the dive briefing was information about the marine life we might see. I did see a nice drum fish on the first dive. The second dive at about 10:00 AM was at the same

site and I saw the drum fish again, barracuda, medium-sized crab and a cleaning station. Lunch was on the upper deck, which has a large shaded area, hot tub and open sunning area. After lunch, we moved to Coco Sea Mount and dove at 2:00 PM where I saw angel fish (queen and Korean), spade, barracuda, needle fish and sponges. At about 4:00 PM there was another dive at this site, followed by dinner at 6:00 PM. A night dive was offered every night at 7:30 PM. The only deviation was moving the first morning dive to 7:00 AM, followed by the hot breakfast (which I and several other divers liked better). Most dives were walls or sea mounts except for one deep shipwreck (110 feet). The sites around Roatan included Marys Place (swim-thru), Valley of the Kings, Wreck of the Aguila, Half Moon Bay Wall. The sites around Utila include Old House, Pinnacle, Black Hill Sea Mount and Jack Neil Point. The diving is good for beginners and intermediate divers. The marine life is mainly small to medium-size fish, trumpet fish, butterfly, damsel, eels, turtles, rays and one sleeping nurse shark. All the food was American-style; various foods for the hot breakfast during the week were eggs cooked to order, pancakes, French toast, omelets, sausage, bacon, etc. Over the week we had the following for lunches: soups, sub sandwiches, tacos (chicken and beef), spaghetti with meat sauce, salads, cheese/hamburgers, sausage, fries, etc. Dinners offered home-made bread, salads, creamy chicken and rice, red snapper, Spanish rice, pork chops, baked beans, shrimp Alfredo, steak and lobster, potatoes, etc. Desserts were chocolate cake, ice cream, pineapple upside-down cake, cheesecake, key lime pie, etc. I can not recommend this vessel until preventive maintenance is done; the vessel is thoroughly cleaned

to get rid of the bugs and ants. Also, there is a safety issue that the on-deck DM must help the divers get in and out of the water, keep an eye on them, record depth and dive time and fill tanks. This led to one of our divers surfacing early and not being able to get assistance for several minutes. They need additional deck personnel to do the recording and filing so that the on-deck DM can actively assist and watch the divers in the water.

Utila Aggressor, March 2007, David Reubush (davereubush@cox.net), Toano, VA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, no currents. This was perhaps the least satisfying live-aboard we have ever been on. Part of the problem was due to the weather (there had been a big storm the previous week and, as a result, there was lots of silt/sand in the water) and part was due to the crew/boat. For a boat that was "overhauled" (former Turks and Caicos Aggressor) and placed back in service in February 2006, it needed work. The shower head in our cabin and that in at least one other cabin leaked constantly. (The one in the other cabin was so bad it kept the carpet in that cabin wet all week.). When you wanted to take a shower, almost no water came out. When we got into the cabin on Saturday night, I asked a crew member to please have the shower fixed — it never happened. The shower of the folks with the wet carpet finally did not work at all and they threatened to start using the crew shower — theirs finally got fixed. The air conditioning worked too well. It was frigid in our cabin. Instead of having a vent that was adjustable, the cabin vents were fixed wide open. The solution was lots of duct tape to close off most of the vent. The cook and her assistant were great. We had really good food all week.

The captain appeared to be wedded to a fixed itinerary instead of being flexible and looking for the best visibility. We only moved once because the visibility was too low. There was one afternoon that we did the dive after lunch in low viz and nobody did the 2nd afternoon dive or the night dive and the captain made no effort to move to find a better place. The divemasters, for the most part, were also not really into guiding dives or looking for stuff for us to see. The beginning of the week the photo guy was swimming around taking everyone's picture for the CD they give you, but after he finished he spent the dives he was in with us doing his own photography thing. The one dive I remember that was led by the captain was the low viz dive and all he did was an out and back. Just not the attentiveness that we experienced on the Belize Aggressor. The folks who own the boat also own a resort on Utila and appear to be better than the boat experience would have you expect. Instead of sticking us with the typical Aggressor "Friday night dinner is on your own," they invited the whole boat to the resort for grilled lobster tails. As far as fish life is concerned, we did not see a whale shark and almost all the big fish have been caught so all you see are small tropicals. UW Photography Comments: Large camera table and fresh water rinse tank on dive deck. Convenient battery charging station in main salon. Only problem I had was crew was, from time to time, not attentive and I had to wait to get my camera handed to me.

Utila Aggressor, April 2007, Tony Flaris (tflaris@bellsouth.net), Neptune Beach, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. There were 13 passengers aboard the Utila Aggressor for 5-1/2 days of diving with 7 days total. 3 O/W

Instructors, 2 Dive Masters and most of the rest were Advanced O/W. The boat is the former Turks and Caicos Aggressor, and should be sunk as a new wreck site. She is showing her age with problems ranging from AC temperature control with some rooms freezing cold while others were saunas, leaking pipes flooding our cabin along with broken ice machine (located upstairs), coupled with a broken gear box (running on one engine for most of the week), and last but not least, generator problems which plagued us the whole week. Hot water was hit-and-miss and sometimes water itself was a rarity, occasionally turned off for some unknown reasons. The shower heads on the dive decks were the only ones that had adequate pressure, with the ones in the cabin being a mere mist. The stairs leading down to the dive platform were awkward, along with the stairs leading down to the cabins. Both sets had narrow steps at a steep angle. The cabins were small and the shower and head combo unit was separated by a shower curtain. Our cabin had a double bunk on the bottom with a single bunk on top, which caused multiple head injuries due to the limited space between bunks and ceiling. Captain Eddie, First Mate Nestor and Abe as Instructor/Dive Master were our crew for the week, as well as Galley Staff Candy and Marna. Food was plentiful and of local flavor. Snacks were always available, including hot cookies and hot chocolate for the night dives. Special dietary needs were met and the service was terrific, which included dinners being served to your table. Weather was 15-20 knots for 3 days of the trip, causing many sites to have limited visibility. Entries and exits were challenging, as well as some strong currents and surge on many dives. Captain struggled to find accommodating

sites during the beginning of the week, and for the most part he succeeded. But as mechanical problems developed, many sites were chosen for accessibility to parts and repair, resulting in low visibility sites and sites frequented by day boats. When the wind died down near the end of the trip, the boat was plagued by many mechanical problems which were never clarified or acknowledged, leaving us to speculate, wonder and guess. Many questions were answered with blank stares. The lack of information contributed to some stress on the boat, and while schedules were made daily, many times they were modified without much consent of the passengers. Several dive briefings had incorrect depths of the mooring anchor. Due to several local boats, the crew was able to locate 2 whale sharks and was able to get us in the water several times for a snorkel encounter with whale sharks. This included long open water swims and rides on the dingy to drop divers on cue. The crew worked hard and succeeded at enabling the divers to have several up-close experiences. The sharks sized in the 20- to 25-foot range and were truly remarkable. Unfortunately, the next day, without aid from local boats, there were no sightings. I felt it would have been beneficial for the crew to share their knowledge about the feasibility of an encounter on the next day rather than asking the divers to choose between diving and whale shark encounters. Most of the divers did not want to impose, and never was there a vote or a show of hands. Nitrox was available onboard using a membrane system. The cost was \$100 US for the week. There were only 2 days where the Nitrox was at or near 32 percent. The first several days were 27 or 28 percent. The crew was friendly, but most of the time aloof. rarely did you feel

they cared about the enjoyment of the divers, but rather were more concerned with their own problems. When they were made aware of problems, they appeared to be ignored.

Utila Aggressor, May 2007, Martha and Jeff Hubbard (hubbard182@att.net), Glenmont, NY. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm, choppy. Continental Airlines failed to deliver luggage for several passengers from a nonstop flight from the states to San Pedro Sula for more than four days. Most of the luggage was tagged Priority by Continental, but this had no effect. The first order of business on the first day was a predawn departure from La Ceiba to Utila to get rental (but they never charged for any of it) dive gear for those passengers whose luggage Continental had delayed. I think the next several days diving was limited somewhat by the captains wish to remain close to an island where luggage transfer could take place. The salon is cramped with tables for 14. The cabins (5 with bunks — double below, single above, and one quad with two bunk sets) are tiny, but each has a private head. Sink is in the bedroom, toilet in the shower. Crew members were responsive to problems (sewage backing up in showers, A/C off.) Many passengers complained of overactive A/C in the cabins, but its better than not enough and duct tape over the vents helped. The captain agreed, on application by our ever-vigilant group leader, to have the first dive before breakfast and the night dive before dinner (though it keeps the kitchen staff up later). Like most live-boards, the last night dinner is on your own. But, the owner, Capt. Troy, came aboard to invite us all to be his guests for dinner at his luxurious Laguna Beach Resort. He picked us up on a large sport fishing

boat, took us to the resort, gave us a beach barbecue dinner, and returned us to the Aggressor! The crew of five works hard and may be understaffed. Several times the crew member on the dive platform was occupied with a cell phone when divers were launching or returning. The diving is well organized and the deck is spacious. Nitrox or air, always more than 3000 psi. Five dives a day, no excuses trying to cut a dive here or there, and no “rationing” of night dives. (There is no shore diving) The diving was disappointing. Reefs are OK and there are 2 pretty good wrecks ... but no fish! We saw three huge groupers on the Aguila wreck and no other fish longer than a foot or so, except a few barracudas and morays, anywhere. I hope there are more numerous fish in more distant sites, and if there are, the ship needs to be there, because the diving close to Utila and Roatan isn't good enough.

Utila Aggressor, June 2007, Rainer & Kristin Farrag, Dundee, IL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, surge. Capt. Eddy, Nestor and the crew were terrific! Our week was most enjoyable diving. I only went for one reason — to find bluebell tunicates. Capt. Eddy and Nestor made sure I found plenty of them! Really cool seahorses and a quillfin blenny! Plenty of table space for camera set-ups and plenty of plugs for recharging.

Utila Aggressor, September 2007, James D. Heckelma (hectorjd@dacor.net), Norwalk, OH. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy. The crew is phenomenal! Captain Eddy, divemasters, Nestor and Sasha, cook Candy and steward John, all do an excellent job. Although I have been on better reefs, the crew

made the diving exciting and enjoyable. One of them (Eddy, Nestor, or Sasha) always went on the dive to point out the critters, most of which I probably would never have found. Although you can dive your own profile, I found it worthwhile to follow them. Miss Candy prepared excellent meals and snacks. A continental breakfast was available at 6:30, with a hot breakfast served at 7:00. Fruit was always available. Lunches included a delicious homemade soup and a make-your-own sandwich or pasta. Dinners were a meat or fish dish followed by a unique desert. Some meals were barbequed and served on the sun deck. Morning snacks (between dives) were usually brownies, cookies, or muffins. Afternoon snacks were usually chicken wings, conch fritters, and the like. Hot cocoa was served after each night dive. The crew served wine and cheese to the guests the last night (Friday) aboard. John kept the rooms clean and tidy. The first dive of the day was at 8:00 A.M., followed by a mid-morning dive about 10:30. The first afternoon dive was about 2:00, and the second afternoon dive about 4:30. The night dive was after dinner, usually about 7:30. Utila and Roatan are especially good for macro photography. We also saw scorpion fish, green and spotted moray eels, octopus, turtles, nurse sharks. The Captains log, prepared by one of the divemasters at the end of each trip and posted on www.aggressor.com, provides a detailed description of each days diving during the week. Utila Aggressor is an excellent value.

Utila Aggressor, September 2007, Danee Hubbs, Seattle, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy, no currents. Captain Eddy, Nestor and Sasha, were a delight. When we didn't particularly enthuse over a site, Captain Eddy was

willing to find us a better spot unfailing cheerfulness. Whichever of the crew dove with us, and often 2 went with us, they stayed with us the entire dive, pointing out the tiniest little critters. Nestor even found us a southern stargazer, which gave him a nasty shock. Talk about taking one for the team! The cabins were clean and comfortable, though the showers are a bit tight. Dive platform has 2 hot water showers. Beds were comfortable. When we had trouble during the night with the A/C, someone from the island came out in a boat to get it fixed. Miss Candy and John provided us with enough food to keep us going and the quality was high. UW Photography Comments: The crew consistently found good shots for me and helped me get into position frequently. They showed me a lot about my camera that I hadn't known before since this was only the second trip I had used it.

Utila Aggressor, September 2007, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), Guaynabo, PR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy. Even though the trip was cut short by the arrival of hurricane Felix, the facilities were fine. The crew was unparalleled in its attention and competence, and one would be hard put to find a better skipper than Captain Eddie. The hurricane evacuation was expertly managed and the owner of the vessel, Troy Bodden, attended to the transportation of all 12 passengers from Utila to the mainland.

SABA/ST. EUSTATIUS/ ST. KITTS

Caribbean Explorer II, December 2006, David McDougall (dmcdougall@ncbb.net), Newcastle, CA. Experience: