

one bucket most of the time rather than distributing them between buckets.

TURKS AND CAICOS

Turks and Caicos Aggressor II, December 2006, Mark Tarczynski (to_da_moon@hotmail.com), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 125 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Went on the Turks and Caicos Aggressor II for two weeks back-to-back. The weather was so good that during the Christmas week we were able to sail way out to West Sand Spit ... a dive site rarely visited ... the vis was 80 to 100 feet! Designed and built from the hull up by Captain Piers Van Der Walt, the T&C Aggressor II has every modern convenience a diver would want in a live-aboard dive ship. Yeah ... it's a little more expensive than other live-aboards, but it's worth every penny. Piers Van Der Walt is Owner, Designer, and Captain of the ship. If I'm not mistaken, there's a lot of pride-of-ownership visible in this operation! I've been on the T&C Aggressor for four weeks over the past two years. I marvel at Piers' ability to always have the best crews sailing the Caribbean.

Turks and Caicos Explorer, February 2007, T Griffin (trasea@gmail.com), Gaithersburg, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, choppy. 4 people were delayed due to weather and didn't arrive until the second day. The TCEII was captained by Jean-Francois, also known as JF, with an easy-going but hard-working manner that puts you at ease and gets the job done. The captain worked it out for us to stay at the dive site while they sent the tender to retrieve the 4 latecomers We did dive the same site all day, but that was better than not diving.

The boat's cabins are reasonably sized, with private bathrooms; there are queen or double beds in each room, and two suites upstairs. The dive deck itself was fairly roomy, although the actual setup areas was a little cramped. Fortunately, divers took turns in gearing up. The dive briefings were detailed: where to go, what to look for. The dive staff was also above average. A DM would be on every dive, and would lead a dive if you requested. Sometimes that is good, because trying to find that one blue anemone on that wall of coral can be difficult! Most of the dive sites were similar -type walls. West Sand Spit was pristine. A lone dolphin joined us for an incredible adventure. Later that day, we spotted whales and had an afternoon of whale watching from the boat. The Smoke Stacks — named for the huge barrel sponges found along the dive. Lush soft coral forest abounded on this drift dive. The food on board was average — no complaints here. We don't eat red meat, so the chef always had a separate plate prepared for us. There were mechanical problems, but we chose not to let it bother us and enjoyed our vacation for what we had. Departing TC, we chose a mid-afternoon flight, hoping to explore the town, but there really isn't anything to explore, and the boat is a long way from anywhere, it makes no sense to delay the departure. Take the first flight of the day — not as many people, no lines at security. UW Photography Comments: Has a separate table for photography, including a huge rinse tank for camera use only. We were able to leave our camera in the tank, and were lucky to discover a small leak before we took it down to depth.

Turks and Caicos Explorer II, April 2007, Eric Ault (EAult@comcast.net), Wheaton, IL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to

79 F, calm, surge, no currents. . The boat, which holds up to 20, is in good shape; the crew didn't spend a lot of time fixing things. I found the cabins to be pretty roomy by live-aboard standards, even the lower cabins with bunks. Some people found the public areas to be a little cramped. The sectional sofa in the lounge was not comfortable. The boat has a sun deck with about a dozen chaises as well as a covered flying bridge for those in the SPF 30+ crowd. Chef Stan, who has been cooking on boats for years, continues his culinary magic. His desserts were particularly good. Two refrigerators, one on the flying bridge and one in the lounge, stock soft drinks and beer. Red and white wines were available, along with a limited selection of hard liquors. No drinking and diving. There was a roomy, carpeted camera table overlooking the dive platform. A cameras-only rinse tank was available. Each diver was provided an aluminum 80 with a few larger or smaller tanks as options. Nitrox at around 31% was available for an extra charge. Most divers were using it. Each station on the dive deck had under-seat storage for small items. With everyone gearing up, the dive deck became crowded. We soon learned to stagger gearing up to avoid our neighbors. The largely Canadian crew was joined by one Scot and one Frenchman. They functioned smoothly. Divemasters led every dive but mostly gave a tour of the site rather than pointing out things of interest. The TCEII is a relatively tall vessel and, as a result, it swings at anchor as much if not more than many live-aboards on which we've been. This made site navigation a bit trickier than usual. Heavy westerly winds with accompanying surge made diving at many of the usual dive sites impossible. Most of our dives were done at French Cay or West Sand Spit.

Captain Jean-Francois took advantage of the flat, calm seas on Wednesday to do a couple of semi-drift dives in an area the boat seldom visits. But by Thursday the winds had returned, scrubbing the last two dives of the day. We enjoyed the healthy-looking reefs during our week of diving, along with the usual tropicals. Caribbean reef sharks were seen on a number of dives, along with the occasional turtle, nurse shark and spotted eagle ray. We noted quite a few large tiger and Nassau groupers, something not seen at many locales. Large schools of jacks swirled under the boat at many sites. Transfers to and from the airport are arranged but not included in the price of the cruise. We waited in line over four hours to check in, followed by 45 minutes more in the security line. Our U.S. Air 3:15 p.m. flight departed at 6:15 p.m.

Turks and Caicos Explorer II, May 2007, Irina Zeylikman, Lexington, MA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. The cabins are clean, spacious with plenty of storage space. All cabins have in-suite showers and heads. There are two hot water showers on the dive platform. All dives are done from the boat, making a giant stride. The boat swings a lot on the mooring line, mostly because of its size, and it takes getting used to when coming back to the boat. There is one dive master in the water on every dive, but people had an option to follow the dive master or dive on their own. Great crew, J.F, the captain, Jenn, Erica, Blue, Guy, Pier, Chris, all of them are professional and a lot of fun. The food was good and Stan went out his way to accommodate people's preferences.

Turks and Caicos Explorer II, May 2007, Donna Teach (Dteach@chi.osu.edu), Columbus, OH. Experience:

251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy. The T&C Explorer II was retrofitted in Feb. 2007. Although not at the top of our list of live-aboard experiences, the diving was stellar, the boat is comfortable, the crew is accommodating, and the food was fabulous. This is not high-adrenaline diving but a great respite in the Caribbean. Our cabin (#1) was roomy, with a standing dresser, closet and more storage under the queen-sized bed. We only used a tiny portion of the available storage. The bathroom was usual size with the typical small shower but, thankfully, a well-flushing toilet (never to be discounted on a live-aboard!). An in-room thermostat was a great plus and we were able to keep the room at just-right temperatures all week. Although our cabin was clean and well-maintained, it did show wear. There was also a TV/DVD player in our room. The Explorer is large for a live-aboard, with cabins on three decks. The top fly-deck was covered and great for afternoon shade, there was a sun deck with comfortable loungers for sun worshipers and the salon and dive deck were one level down. A few cabins and crew quarters were one deck below the salon. The boat accommodates 20 divers, but there were only 14 so we all had plenty of room. Again, plenty of storage space on the dive deck for everyone's gear, with Nitrox on board. After putting on dive gear, we walked down a few steps to the dive platform that could comfortably allow four divers to put on fins. Crew was always on hand to check gear and hand down cameras. The ladders on the boat were among the best I've seen and make water exits easy. A crew member was always in the water to offer a guided tour or you were free to go on your own. The day's schedule was published every morning with five dives

offered: two morning, two afternoon and one evening dive. Captain Pierre did a great job in avoiding rain to find stellar dive sites. Good conditions allowed diving at French Caye and West Sand Spit (although visibility at this site was poor due to the tides). During my last trip to T&C we saw Eagle Rays on nearly every dive, but not this trip (just one ray). Although the reefs were healthy, there were few large pelagics. There are few sites in the region that we've seen recently that are this pristine. Blue and purple sea anemones, giant barrel sponges, black coral, fan coral. The walls and reefs were packed with life and great photo opps abounded. We spent most dives over T&C's deep walls that were packed with lobsters, eels and tons of juveniles — I spotted juvi spotted drums on more than 8 sites. Captain Pierre also accommodated the group with a drift dive off French Caye (but still no big critters). We did have several shark sightings throughout the week and the sharks were not shy, often circling close enough for good photo opps. Some reef sharks appeared in the 6-8 foot range and several nurse sharks. The water temp was so comfortable I wasn't cold once all week, even with night diving. The night diving was comfortable, with pitchers of hot water down the wet suit and hot chocolate after surfacing. Chef Stan has been in live-aboard galleys for over 20 years (we first met him on the Sea Dancer) and keeps guests well-fed. Food and snacks were fabulous. The crew on the Explorer was welcoming and we truly felt it was "our boat" for the week. Channels are shallow running into the marinas which means taking Zodiacs out from the dock to the boat with all luggage in tow. We were able to board in the harbor but had to use a Zodiac to return to shore at the end of the week. A bit of a pain.