

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Diving From the *Kona Aggressor II*

Live-aboard Diving in Polynesia, USA

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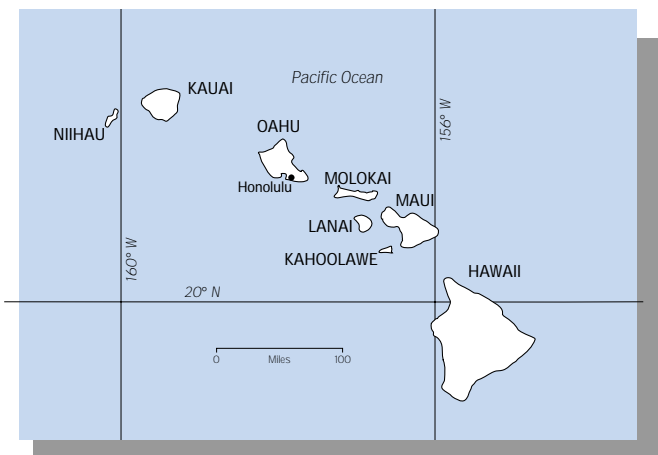
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Dear Fellow Divers:

I'm a fortunate diver who has had the chance to dive many of the world's best venues. But I'm writing to tell you about an American destination that, if I relax my standards a tad, can produce some damn good diving: the big island of Hawaii. Here you'll find tropical beaches and snow-topped 13,796' Mauna Kea. There's both a desert-like dry side and verdant rainforest that gets 200" of rain each year, and even a brace of Polynesian culture. And, beneath the sea, there's a range of endemic IndoPacific fish and exciting diving. Shut your eyes, then open them, and you'll swear you're in the South Pacific, not the north Pacific.

What? You have misgivings? Can it compare to, say, Fiji? Well, my week aboard the *Kona Aggressor II* with a lively bunch of world-traveled divers produced pleasure-filled and varied diving, though I missed what a guest the previous week had inscribed in the guest book: manta and spotted eagle rays, pilot whales, and a whale shark! Of course: "shoulda been here last week."

Yet what's impressive here is that you swim among 600 or so species of IndoPacific fish (not garden variety Caribbean critters), 176 of which you can't see anywhere else, including the Hawaiian bigeye, lionfish, and hogfish. During my week in November I saw plenty of the local fish, including some pretty rare critters. To-wit: In search of a cleaning station, I followed my compass past pinnacles and over small valleys filled with lava rocks and corals. I was looking for a small spire with varieties of angel and butterflyfish surrounding it. I descended to the 86' bottom and there, in the distance, was the beautiful and elusive Tinker's angel-fish, appearing like a silver and black shimmering beacon from a distance, and a very busy cleaning station too! (This



Copydeeper-water fish is so over-collected for the aquarium trade the dive site must remain nameless...so you can see it, too.) As I headed up, I stopped at a pinnacle with a sociable green turtle, a common creature here, and enjoyed stunning pyramid butterflies flitting up and down the walls. Schools of anthias and other fish curled from the pinnacle lip like flower petals blowing in a wind. Accompanied by small morays and clouds of colorful small fish, I cranked my computer back into the green after a thoroughly engaging hour's dive.

Most diving here takes place along the stark, rugged, and beautiful south Kona coast, a rocky, arid, sea- and wind-sheltered stretch of coastline. The craggy southwest shore is newly-spawned and constantly expanding due to the active volcanic activity. Since only the northernmost spots get dived by land-based boats, most sites reached by the Aggressor are pristine. In fact, the only evidence the sites had been dived at all were the moorings and one ancient, encrusted barbecue someone had jettisoned. (Capt. Monk swore it wasn't him.) The characteristic lava slopes covered with rubble and hard corals were occasionally broken by underwater mesas that resembled an Arizona landscape. (Expect to find hard corals that aren't particularly colorful or unique and little, if any, soft coral.) Sites were often punctuated by pinnacles and lava tubes filled with endemic inverts and interesting shadow-dwelling lionfish, squirrel- and cardinalfishes.

At Au'au Crater, I took a giant stride off the platform into 78°, gin-clear water. I swam over the drop-off, peering around for the hammerheads and rays that they told me cruised here (none, of course). Among jacks, parrotfish, and triggerfish, I headed toward the north wall of a v-shaped canyon. Near the shore, the canyon funneled up and inward and the walls were rich with bandit angelfish, lionfish, nudibranchs, cleaner and ghost shrimp, lobsters, octopus, and morays. Swimming across the boulder-strewn floor, I spotted yellowtail and rockmover wrasse, leaf, titan and devil scorpions, a crown-of-thorns starfish breakfasting on coral, and even a day octopus willing to pose. Enjoying the Technicolor denizens and playful Hawaiian spinner dolphins I saw several times, it was hard to imagine I was only a five-hour flight from home.

But yes: I wasn't just close to home; I still had all the home comforts. No converted crew boat this Aggressor: built as a diving live-aboard in 1992, she is posh and comfortable. At 80', she easily accommodates its crew of five plus ten divers housed in five quiet, private staterooms, each with a lower queen and upper single berth, a bathroom, a large, scenery-drinking 3' x 3' window -- not a porthole -- and modest storage. The zealous crew kept the staterooms immaculate; everyone pitches in on this boat, and duties rotate. The walrus-mustachioed Capt. Monk Daniel doesn't expect his crew to do anything he won't, so he schlepped tanks, led dives, and scoured heads. It was a refreshing attitude, and the boat's atmosphere was the better for it.

The staterooms are on both sides of the spacious salon and dining area, where they serve meals family-style at a long table. There's also a slide-sorting light table and ample audio-video gear -- 8mm and VHS VCRs and monitor, CD player, even decibel-blasting surround-sound -- to make the pickiest audiophile happy. Although the media room lured many guests, I spent most of my evenings relaxing on deck or in the hot tub (kept at 98° to feel hot while avoiding problems from hot-water immersion after long dives), asking the media buffs to turn it down (they did).

with a ready-to-launch inflatable stay alert in case anyone is challenged. Dive times are up to you -- mine ranged from 45 to 90 minutes -- but a 110' floor is enforced. Divers are asked to report depths and times on returning, but they don't check computers (no one complained when I went a bit deeper on one dive). Two deeper dives are scheduled for the morning, and the boat does a three-point stable mooring for two afternoon dives and a night dive after dinner, an option foregone by most of my fellow guests. The trip's only dud dives were off the Kona Surf Hotel, a badly abused area with modest life. While we'd hoped for mantas there, only snorkelers came to our lights. But divers can easily get up to 28 dives in the 5.5 dive days; I averaged 4 a day at a pace that felt relaxed.

We ended our diving at Turtle Pinnacles north of Kona, a popular destination that turned out to be one of my favorite dive spots worldwide. The viz is less than most Kona coast spots, a mere 50 - 75', but the pinnacles are spectacular: green turtles, some as big as your coffee table, gather to get cleaned by several species of tangs. You can approach quietly and get close; the turtles settle in natural depressions in the coral at 60' and go into a trance-like state as they get their shells scoured of algae by a kaleidoscope of yellow, grey, and blue surgeonfish. Their necks and flippers hang leisurely, and the look on their faces is purely "aaah, a little to the left... yes, that's soooo good!" When you're through gawking at turtles, macro subjects abound. I found plenty of colorful invertebrates in the pinnacles, rocks and coral, including nudibranchs, pipefish, and shrimp. There were also dwarf and stout morays, juvenile yellowtail coris, dragon wrasses, flame angels, resting turtles and more. I've seen nearly-football-sized Commerson's frogfish hereabouts, so encrusted they looked like part of the landscape.

On our last dive day, we cruised back to the Kailua Bay Pier after two dives. The crew and Kona-based staff hosted a wine and cheese party on the sun deck overseen by the ship's mascot, "Bosun," a 3-foot-high, carved wooden brown bear with red fins, blue swim shorts, mask, and Nitrox tank, plus a few floral and shell leis. They cut us loose for dinner on our own (an Aggressor "tradition"), so we walked half a mile to the Chart House, with a gorgeous sunset and good, if expensive, dinner. On our return we gathered for a slide show with "best" photos from guests and some candid shots Mike had taken of us all during the week, ours to take home. As happens on live-aboards, our group had gotten to know each other well, and great camaraderie prevailed.

Hawaiian Collection

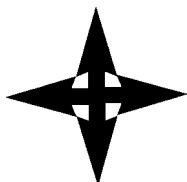
While marine advocates and Hawaii's tropical fish collectors have been at each other's throats for decades, it hasn't seemed to matter. Despite 20-year studies indicating that the practice has substantial impact on fish populations, and despite public comment that was 93.5% in favor of a partial ban, fish collecting has been de rigueur. From the human point of view, this isn't major industry — as of 1999, there were only about 50 commercial aquarium permits for west Hawaii — but the annual take of those who held them was estimated to be at least 225,000 critters. This amounts to a whopping 4,500 fish per operator, many of them rarities such as lionfish, Tinker's angelfish, and flame angels.

The grassroots movement to limit collecting began garnering serious attention after a 1995 Kona town meeting on the issue attended by over 230 people. The Hawaii legislature organized a community study group shortly thereafter, and in July, 1998, after circulating petitions and holding meetings galore, fish advocates tasted victory. "Act 306" of the Hawaii legislature designated a minimum of 30% of west Hawaii coastal waters as "Fish Replenishment Areas," effective December 31, 1999. Currently nine separate areas from Upolu Point (North Kohala) to Ka Lae (Ka'u) have been declared off-limits to collectors, an area comprising 35.2% of west Hawaiian coast.

The process is just beginning. Proponent Lisa Choquette of Dive Makai notes that it's far too soon to evaluate what impact the ban will have on fish populations. "In previously shut down areas that are substantially depleted, it has taken about 5 years for a noticeable difference," she says. "It's been a long, nasty fight, but slowly the tide is turning for the fish!!"

The *Aggressor* dives year-round and the diving's equally good across the seasons, though there's greater likelihood of seeing whale sharks and humpback whales in winter. It amazes me how many divers come back to Kona repeatedly. While they might see it as a nearby Polynesia, with visits to heiaus (traditional temple platforms), the royal Place of Refuge and petroglyph fields, and a full luau to experience the meaning of aloha, I suspect they're really returning for excellent diving off a world-class, uncrowded live-aboard -- certainly better than ordinary Fiji diving, as good as good Fiji diving, and a hell of a lot easier to reach.

— L. J.



Diver's Compass: Contact *Kona Aggressor II* at Live/Dive Pacific: phone 800-344-5662 or 808-329-8182; fax 808-329-2628; e-mail livedive@compuserve.com; website www.pac-aggressor.com. All-inclusive one-week cruises (Sat.-Sat.) \$1,895... Non-stop, 5-hour flights from L.A. or San Francisco often aggressively discounted. *Aggressor* van will meet and drop you at Kona-Keahole airport or town... Save 50% on lodging with your entertainment card or pick up land-package bargains off-season (roughly Easter-December excepting the Iron Man Triathlon in late October)... Nearest chamber in Honolulu, 6 sea-hours away... Air temps hover near 80° by day, 70° at night. Water highs near 80° August-October to low 70s... November-May 5mm of neoprene and a hood will help, 3mm is fine summers... C-cards checked, waivers required... Absolutely no spearfishing or collecting... A lift is available with advance notice, making the boat fully accessible to disabled divers (full five-star rating by the Handicapped Scuba Association)... E-6 done nightly, mounts available, Nikonos photo/video gear available for rental, good range of rental dive gear, some limited repairs possible... *Aggressor* fully equipped with oxygen, first-aid equipment, radio, cell phone. Water is unlimited -- 1,200 gallon-a-day watermaker. No da kine water or health pilikia (troubles) here, brah, you're in the USA!

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The DAN Accident Report

serious mistakes divers make

Each year, about 1,000 American divers are treated in a hyperbaric chamber. The Diver's Alert Network has now begun to analyze these accidents, last year studying 431. Of course, an advantage of analyzing accidents is that, since dead men don't talk, only surviving accident victims can tell researchers what really happened.

While some of us experienced divers like to think of ourselves as infallible and immortal, it's not so. In looking at DAN's cases, one sees that most victims were active

divers, having made more than twenty dives in the previous twelve months. And trusting our fate to God's own microchip isn't a surefire deal either. Sixty percent of the injured divers were using a computer. We must beware.

And, not only must we beware of ourselves; we must also beware of our guides. Forty-one divers were bent following the guide's plan and tagging along. That's ample proof why one ought to be taught to be an independent diver — and why a lot more guides ought to be

disfranchised by their employer and their training agencies.

Two-thirds of the injured divers reported making safety stops, and 25% of injured divers made decompression stops. They thought they were doing the right thing. Their bodies thought otherwise.

The biggest single error a bent diver makes is too rapid an ascent. Sometimes a diver just isn't paying attention, and, because of a little extra air in his BC, the rise is too fast. Other times a diver has run out or is short on air. Yet other times a current carries a diver upward too fast. Some of them may not notice it, while others can't stop it. Whatever the cause, it's not just novices who rise too quickly; some of the best of us do.