

fit into their consoles and have battery lives that are measured in years instead of days, I was back to lugging the brick (EDGE) and its air-integrated buddy the Phoenix. The truth is, now it's the Phoenix's display that I like. It gives me what I want to know in that clear, easy-to-read format, and I've even grown to appreciate its air-remaining time feature. Why don't they redesign the EDGE/Phoenix with the same old display, but with new batteries and less weight?

Upon returning from my last trip, I rushed off my Phoenix to Scuba West. I got it back along with graphs of 27 dives (35 hours). It was cool. The charts

told a lot about each dive. A readout from Sipadan shows a night dive. Everything I ever wanted to see was on this wall between 20 feet and the surface. Other dives would show when I lost the boat and had to surface to get directions. Some showed where I had stretched the rules, others a picture-perfect profile going deep, then gradually working back up during the dive. It's somewhat like watching a video after the game to see where you went wrong and where you can improve.

Scuba West of Cleveland, Ohio, offers the service for a startup fee of \$35 plus shipping and handling, with future

downloads for \$20 plus shipping and handling. If you send a photocopy of your logbook, they will include your info in the readout. Call Joseph Suchy at 800-476-3483.

The Orca factory will also download your Phoenix. They charge a straight \$35, which includes standard UPS shipping back to you. However, you have to fill in your own logbook entries on location, date, temperature, and so forth. Orca can also tell you if there's a dealer with a downloader near you; call 703-478-0333. Or, if you want, you can buy your own downloader with a PC interface for around \$400.



An Accountant's Comparison

Wave Dancer in Belize vs. *Bay Islands Aggressor*

During January/February 1994, this In Depth subscriber spent a week on the Wave Dancer in Belize, then flew down to Roatan, Honduras, to spend the following week on the Bay Islands Aggressor. How do they compare? Here's a blow-by-blow comparison.

Cabins: The sleeping accommodations on the *Wave Dancer* are the best. Every cabin has a private head and shower; cabins on the lower deck have a double lower bunk and a single upper; the deluxe cabins on the dive-deck level are similar, but have windows. The two master suites (cabins 1 and 2) on the dive-deck level are set up with a queen-sized bed. All cabins have ample room for storage and are air conditioned. There are robes provided in each

cabin, and the towels and linens are changed frequently.

The *Aggressor* has eight cabins, seven with a double lower bunk and a single upper bunk like the *Wave Dancer*, and one a "quad," with four bunks. The cabins, all air conditioned, are located one deck below the main/dive deck, with no windows or portholes. Each cabin has a mirror and a washstand, but there are only two shared head/shower facilities (plus one head for wet divers up on the main/dive deck). To reach the cabins, you must walk through the dining/salon area. Storage space is quite tight, but adequate for experienced live-aboard divers. (I've heard of plans to reconfigure the *Aggressor's* eight cabins into six

or seven larger cabins with toilets and showers as on the *Wave Dancer*.) The room towels could be changed more frequently, but there are always plenty of dry towels for wet divers or for use on the sun deck. Score: 10/8 in favor of the *Wave Dancer*.

Food: Both ships provide ample, well-prepared meals and snacks, but there are some real differences. All meals on the *Aggressor* are served buffet style. An early-bird continental breakfast is set out around 5:30 or 6:00 a.m., and later (around seven) there is a full breakfast — eggs, sausages, pancakes, bacon, French toast, etc. The *Wave Dancer* brings early coffee to your room (!) upon request, and the regular breakfast is at a

set time with help-yourself cereals, fruits, and juices, with individual orders taken for eggs, toasted bagels, sausages, etc. The orange juice was fresh squeezed on the *Wave Dancer* and absent entirely on the *Aggressor*. The breakfast edge goes to the *Wave Dancer*.

Both have between-dive snacks around 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. and similar lunch buffets of soups, salads, pastas, and sandwich fixings. The *Aggressor* had a slight edge in quality, tastiness, and choice for lunch.

During the single week, each served lobster tail, barbecued steak, curried chicken, whole baked turkey, grilled fresh grouper, shrimp linguini, and so forth, and all dinners were accompanied by abundant salads, several vegetables, baked potatoes or rice, fresh-baked breads, excellent soups, fancy desserts, etc. The *Wave Dancer* dinners were good, but the *Aggressor's* were outstanding. Both ships willingly and capably accommodated vegetarian and other special diets. Another close call. Score: 10/9 in favor of the *Aggressor*.

Beverages: All beverages on the *Wave Dancer*, including beer, wine, and liquor, were free. They even had very good local beer on tap. The wines set out at dinner time tended to be low-quality Gallo wines in half-gallon jugs, but better wines were available if you asked. On the *Aggressor* the soft drinks were free, but there was an honor system for beer, wine, and liquor. Their choice of beer was strictly Budweiser (or Bud Lite) and the cost was \$2 a can. Wine was also \$2 per glass, but a glass of wine at dinner did not incur a charge, as I discovered when settling up the bill for the week. Both red and white wines of excellent quality were available (just ask). Both

ships had a clearly stated and posted policy that drinking alcohol meant the end of your day's diving — but on both ships, a beer or so at lunch or midafternoon seemed to be deliberately overlooked. Whatever weight you choose to give this attribute, the edge was clearly in favor of the *Wave Dancer*. Score: 10/8 in favor of the *Wave Dancer*.

Diving Convenience: Both ships have similar arrangements for storage of diving gear. The tanks are arranged behind long benches, and each diver has a specific location on the bench with dive gear storage under the assigned position. There are two flights of steps leading down from the dive deck to a broad platform. On the *Wave Dancer*, the fins are kept at the platform level for the entire trip; on the *Aggressor*, divers place their fins, mask, and camera just above the dive platform immediately before each dive. On both ships the crew members were very attentive and competent in handling cameras and providing assistance during entry and exit. Both ships had broad, dual-ascent ladders, and two warm showers available for use immediately upon exit. Fresh, warm towels were also abundant at the dive-deck level on both ships. Both gave excellent dive briefings, and both maintained safe policies regarding maximum depth, buddy diving, and safety stops. However, on both ships, photographers and "gorilla divers" often interpreted buddy diving as meaning someone else was in the same ocean! After the first couple of days, the crew looked the other way at this behavior. Both ships encouraged the use of computers.

There were some differences. The dives on the *Wave Dancer* were generally at five specific

times; on the *Aggressor*, we were told how long the ship was going to remain at a particular location, and we could dive whenever and as often as we wished, as long as we were back before departure time. When going in for a dive, each diver was asked to make a check mark opposite his name on a special board, and another upon returning. The *Aggressor* crew also logged the times each diver went in and returned, and asked for a report of maximum depth. *Wave Dancer* crew members were generally willing to accompany a diver or group if asked, whereas the *Aggressor* crew seemed more willing to help divers find unusual critters or to model for photographers. On both ships, crew members were very helpful as guides during night dives.

The *Wave Dancer* has a well-designed hang bar for the safety stop at the 15-foot level and a full tank with multiple octopus stages in case you are too low on air for the 3- to 5-minute recommended stop. The *Aggressor* has a chain-weighted rope at 15 feet and a hookah for emergency air during the safety stop. The hang bar was much more convenient. The *Wave Dancer* had two very large freshwater buckets for rinsing BCs, regulators, and skins, and there were three large buckets reserved specifically for cameras. The *Aggressor* had one rather small tub for cameras, two small buckets for masks and computers, and no provision whatsoever to rinse BCs, regulators, and skins. Only on the last day was a freshwater hose made available for such gear rinses. A special feature on the *Aggressor* was a hot tub on the top deck, which was a true luxury for divers. Tie! Score: 10/10 even. The edge for the *Wave Dancer* was the convenience of the

hang bar and the availability of many large rinse buckets. I felt that this was balanced by the extra freedom of choosing dive times, the more comprehensive (for photographers) pre-dive briefings, and the somewhat more willing assistance as guides or buddies offered by the crew on the *Aggressor* — and, of course, the hot tub!

Photography: Both ships had well-qualified photographic experts as crew members, E-6 processing, cameras for rent, projection equipment for slide shows, the ability to do extensive repairs if needed, a large table area reserved for cameras and camera gear, safe storage locations for additional camera gear, charging stations for batteries and strobes, etc. The *Aggressor's* pre-dive briefings often included recommendations for specific lenses. This was also true of the *Wave Dancer*, but to a lesser extent. The *Aggressor's* extra help for photographers just about made up for its scarcity of rinse buckets. Score: 10/10 even.

End of Trip: In the early afternoon of the last day (Friday), the ships returned to their home ports: *Wave Dancer* to the harbor at Belize City, the *Aggressor* to French Harbor, Roatan. Arrangements could be made from the *Wave Dancer* for short excursions around Belize City, such as a visit to the Mayan ruins at Atul, a trip to the Baboon Sanctuary, a city tour, or a trip to the zoo. (I did not go on any of these, but the consensus at dinner that night was that the zoo was most worthwhile and could be done without a package tour.) On Roatan, the *Aggressor* could make arrangements for you to snorkel with dolphins at Anthony's Key Resort (\$75), to dive with them (\$100), or to visit the museum. A general island tour was an alternative.

Wave Dancer passengers stayed the last night in deluxe rooms at the Radisson Fort George Hotel in Belize and then enjoyed (?) a complimentary dinner that was mediocre at best. Breakfast the following day was not included in the package. The passengers were transferred to the airport at various times to meet their respective flights. On the *Aggressor*, there was an excellent last-night party with good wines, good brands of booze, and excellent snacks. Then the passengers and crew went to dinner together at Romeo's restaurant, next to the ship's berth. The dinner cost extra, but the meal was excellent and well worth the money. The last night was spent on board, and the passengers were transported together to the airport about 8 a.m. Score: 10/10, about even.

Cost: *Wave Dancer's* lower cabins were \$1,395 per person, the deluxe dive-deck cabins were \$1,495, and the master suites were \$1,595 (1-800-932-6237 or most dive travel agents). The rate brochure for the *Bay Islands Aggressor* shows a 1994 rate as \$1,495 per person, but certain dates seem to be "specials" as low as \$1,095; I was fortunate to get this rate. Check with the *Aggressor* Fleet (1-800-348-2628 or most dive travel agents). On both ships, a gratuity of 10 percent was suggested, but the *Wave Dancer* seemed just a bit more pushy in this regard.

Itinerary: The primary destination of the *Wave Dancer* is Lighthouse Reef. Along the way, depending on weather conditions, there may be stops for a few dives (or even a day or so) at Turneffe and/or Glover's Reefs. Turneffe diving is not on a par with Lighthouse, but Glover's can be excellent. The *Bay Islands Aggressor* spends the

first day or two in the vicinity of Roatan (in part, to be able to pick up passengers who might arrive late due to TACA or SAHSA airline problems) and then samples one or more of the other Bay Island locations, such as Guanaja or Cayos Cochinos, depending on weather conditions. Both vessels return to their home ports by early afternoon on Friday. The open ocean crossings can be a bit rough; on both ships, several passengers were rather uncomfortable. There is no way to compare the relative stability of the two, since the currents, winds, and sea states were different. Both captains found calm locations for night anchorage.

Quality of Diving: During my trip in January and February, the visibility was only fair (50–75 feet, sometimes less) in both locations due to recent rains. On a June 1992 *Wave Dancer* trip, I found the visibility to be good, often in excess of 100 feet. Both locations have dramatic walls with good sponge growth, some large groupers, barracudas, an occasional ray, and many smaller fish, but few large pelagics. The dives at Cayos Cochinos were the best by far — less damage, more fish, and much more color. The famous Blue Hole dive at Lighthouse is overrated, in my opinion, but probably worth doing once (and only once). All in all, the diving quality was comparable, with perhaps a slight edge in favor of the Bay Islands because of the excellent dives at Cayos Cochinos.

The Bottom Line: The *Aggressor* doesn't have the luxuries of the *Wave Dancer*, but is not all that far behind. The overall diving experience was comparable, and both trips are a good value for the money.

