
The *Palau Aggressor* Shakeup

Response to Old Problems: New Boat

Dear *In Depth*:

As part of our customer comment card program, we personally respond to all concerns voiced by our guests. With this in mind, we are following up with you concerning complaints we have received from our customers about the negative comments *In Depth* has reported on the *Palau Aggressor* in March 1994. Our customers indicated to us that they felt that the piece was unjust and did not reflect positive experiences they had enjoyed on the very same vessel. They take issue on the overtly negative tone and unbalanced reporting in the article and felt that the record should be set straight.

Publications such as yours may serve to keep some dive operators "honest" and on top of things by encouraging them to react to negative reports. However there is also the tendency to publish bad reports because they make for "good" copy.

We agree that some of the other negative comments reported were actually true several months ago but these real issues got lost in the barrage of negativity. Please take note that we are committed to our customers and have acted upon their concerns with significant changes to the crew, operations and equipment on the *Palau Aggressor*.

We invite one of your editors to join us on another *Palau*

Aggressor trip to allow you to do a follow up review and set the record straight as our guests have requested. In the interim, you will probably be receiving reports from these satisfied *Palau Aggressor* customers. As an unbiased publication, you might want to publish these new reports to update your readers on the positive changes to our operation.

— Anne and Wayne Hasson
Managing Directors
Aggressors International

In Depth also likes to respond to its customers. When we began receiving negative reports on the *Palau Aggressor* from our readers, we didn't just publish them, we sent an editor to check out the situation. As for our report not being balanced, you might want to review a few of our editor's comments from the article:

"It's an excellent boat: roomy, with a crew as hard-working as any in the business. The chef, Erwin, a Belgian expat who has worked at some of the finest hotels in the world, produced meals better than most cruise ships. The Palauan stewardess, Tina, cheerfully kept the cabins shipshape, and Captain Bill Fountain seemingly spent more than 24 hours a day organizing the diving, moving the boat, performing maintenance, and trying his best to keep the guests happy.

"The twin-outboard-powered skiffs, although not ideal, do put *Aggressor* divers on sites within 15 to 40 minutes, and in

the mornings *Aggressor* divers start diving before the day-boat rush. Divers can make up to five dives a day, weather permitting, although some of the dives inside the lagoon are of lower quality. Most of the land-based divers get two dives, sit on a sandy beach between dives, and spend more than two skiff-hours per day getting back and forth.

Yes, we did have a major complaint. The Palau Aggressor was limited in its access to the best of Palau's diving because it was underpowered, had an inadequate anchoring system, and lacked a crane to lift the skiffs up onto the deck. This was something our readers were entitled to know. Your press release announcing the replacement for the Palau Aggressor indicates that you found the same faults.

Having pointed out our observations of the problems in our March article, we concluded that "experienced divers who want to dive Palau now, but understand the problems, will still see some fine dive sites and enjoy, within the limitations of the boat, the delights of Palau underwater." Sounds balanced to me.

You were correct on two points: (1) that the Aggressors are committed to their customers (I remain impressed with the way Aggressor Fleet has been fair minded with their customers and responsive to their suggestions); and (2) that we would be receiving letters from our readers on the positive changes to your operation, such as the one below.

Dear *In Depth*:

One of your seasoned reporters needs to take another trip to investigate the *Palau Aggressor*. My wife and I returned home in April from a 3-week trip to Micronesia, diving Truk Lagoon on the *Thorfinn*, Palau on the *Palau Aggressor*, and Yap with Yap Divers. Today we read the March *In Depth* article about the *Palau Aggressor* and feel compelled to convey our *Palau Aggressor* experiences, as your article paints a 90% different picture. Good news needs to travel just as fast as bad.

During the past six years, we have been fortunate enough to

have been on dive live-aboards in Australia, Red Sea, St. Maarten, Roatan, Belize, Hawaii, Truk, and Palau. Owners and crews change, the weather and sea offer no guarantees, and boat systems are always "at risk" of some level of failure(s). Our trips are planned as thoroughly as possible, using *In Depth* as a critical periodical in deciding which places, operations, and time of year to select. Due to the great distance, time, and bucks required to dive Micronesia, we became chronic planners, following the initial *In Depth* review of the *Palau Aggressor* and all *In Depth* reader reports. We obtained tide tables from NOAA, corresponded directly

with former and current *Palau Aggressor* management, as well as Mike Musto (Trip N Tour), Aggressor Fleet Office (Morgan City), and several "Palau experienced" divers.

The boat crew was energetic, committed, and accommodating. I don't know how much credit to give to Capt. Shell for the turnaround, but our week was nothing like the trip described in your last article.

We were not held to excessive lagoon diving. Walls were spectacular. Lagoon sites were less spectacular with typically poorer vis. Night dives fell short of expectations. We rate night dives at Ngerchong Coral Gardens anchorage and Wonder Channel as fair to good, German Channel as mediocre, 1 Tree Beach as awful. Currents, depths, and tides are vital night dive factors in Palau — particularly after 4-day dives, often beginning with depths of 90–110 feet. During the week, tides fluctuated as much as 6½ feet. . . .

Two skiffs are used to drop divers directly on dive sites and follow them in drift situations. Most skiff trips 5–10 minutes. . . . Efficient, quick, comfortable, putting us directly on the sites. Between dives, the BCs/tanks stayed snapped upright in place at your seat. Air was refilled by long hoses from *Palau Aggressor*. Fins/mask stayed on skiffs in compartments under the seats.

This week gave me the best 25 hours and 33 minutes of bottom time I have ever experienced!

The surface interval brownie tradition is 110% intact. We returned to *Palau Aggressor* after all dives — no hour-and-a-half beach intervals. The additional 10% is for Erwin's special gourmet snacks of chocolate chip cookies and fresh, hot muffins.

Press Release:

Aggressor Fleet Announces *Palau Aggressor II*

The latest innovation in live-aboard technology will soon be found at the number-one diving destination in the world. The new *Palau Aggressor II* will meet all the requirements of Palau's complex diving conditions with a radical advancement — a high-speed, jet-drive dive skiff. Topside diver hassles are circumvented with this state-of-the-art chase boat. Divers travel further and faster to more remote sites in dry, sheltered comfort with a protected camera table to benefit photographers. Aggressor Fleet's signature "No Hassle" diving program at some of Palau's best sites will be followed by a swift return to the mother ship. The chase boat, with divers, is then lifted by hydraulic crane up to the dive deck, where divers simply step out onto the mothership, no ladder required.

After extensive research and suggestions from guests, Aggressor Fleet modified their approach to Palau diving with the all-new mother ship, the *Palau*

Aggressor II, which will replace the existing *Palau Aggressor*. A luxury 100-ft. power catamaran with a stable and spacious 30-ft. beam, the *Palau Aggressor II* has an impressive 26-knot maximum design speed, compared to the current 10 knots, enabling it to move to dive areas quickly and comfortably. The new yacht draws only 4½ feet of water, allowing the vessel to maneuver into areas too shallow for the existing vessel.

The refined design provides three deck levels, an entertainment center, a huge camera table, and an indoor/outdoor bar. Sixteen passengers are accommodated in eight private staterooms with window views, each featuring a queen and single bed and a private head and shower.

For more information about Palau live-aboard diving, contact Aggressor Fleet at 1-800-348-2628.

Shortcomings: *Palau Aggressor's* library is weak. No books on coral or crustacean identification were available and fish books were limited. In an area with 10 to 20 times the numbers of everything found in the Caribbean, a couple hundred dollars worth of books on the *Palau Aggressor* would greatly help the average diver interpret the kaleidoscope of colors, shapes, species in Palau (inside tip: Until that happens invest \$35 in Robert F. Myers's *Micronesian Reef Fish*). . . .

About those currents: Huge tide fluctuations and complex currents in Palau render fixed dive itineraries useless. Professional, experienced dive captains are required to provide optimum results with minimum safety risks. Currents were not a problem on any of the dives we did — annoying for macro on a couple, but not a problem. Briefings were complete with current anticipation and procedure covered. Safety sausages and safety whistles (attached to LP hose) were issued by the *Palau Aggressor* to each diver for the

week. I believe we got our money's worth of professional judgment, putting us on the best sites at the best times for the best results except 1 Tree Beach.

Recommendations: If at all possible, avoid diving Palau only on day boats, limiting the day to two dives and a possible lagoon night dive. There is too much in Palau to see. I have no hesitation in recommending the *Palau Aggressor*, based on our experiences. . . .

— Michael & Mitzi Fields,
Birmingham, AL

Using Credit Cards for Dive Travel

What You Get and What It Costs

Paying for dive travel with a credit card has several advantages. If the booking agent's company goes belly up before you make your trip, you have a measure of protection if you've paid by credit card. Credit card payment also makes it possible to go on trips that you can't really afford. This could be considered either a plus or a minus, but we all know that we'll have more money just down the line. It's the American way.

However, the advantage that appeals to me most is frequent-flyer miles. I use American Express's Membership Miles. For every dollar I charge on my American Express card, I get one frequent-flyer mile. I even charge my groceries. *Consumer Reports* places a value of about two cents per frequent flyer mile, so it's a 2% bonus added to purchases.

When I book a dive trip, I'm ready to reach for my card and

add on those frequent-flyer miles I need to get to Palau. The problem is that not all dive travel specialists accept credit cards, and some that do have started adding a surcharge of 2–3%.

In several states it is illegal to charge extra for using a credit card. The way around it is simple: it's not an additional charge for using a credit card, it's a discount for paying cash or check.

From the travel agents' point of view, they have to pay around 3% for processing a credit card — a charge that comes out of their profit. If the retail price of a trip was determined on a profit margin based solely on cash sales, then a credit card buyer is cutting into an already slim profit margin.

However, determining what a dive travel specialist's profit margin is, or how it was arrived at, is outside the realm of the consumer. I shop around for

the best price with the best terms. Below is a list of dive travel specialists with their policies on credit cards.

Adventure Express **800-443-0799**

Checks only. Uses credit cards to confirm booking, but not to pay for dive trips (unless it's for just one or two nights' hotel accommodations).

Aggressor Fleet **800-348-2628**

Yes, accepts credit cards; no penalty.

Aqua Trek **800-541-4334**

No. Checks only for dive trips, but can charge certain airfare tickets.

Caradonna Caribbean Tours **800-328-2288**

Penalty: add 3% for credit-card use except for trips to Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.