

out dives. Their charges for Nitrox were \$20 per tank. Very nice boat. Their shop is just 10 minutes from the cruise boat pier. (Ph: 877-538-8734 or (340) 776-2381; e-mail bill2381@viaccess.net; website www.st-thomasdivingclub.com)

Underwater Safaris, Marriott Frenchman's Reef, April 2001, Dirk Van Onselder (botomturn@aol.com)
Coral Springs, FL. Vis: 50-60 ft. Water: 82-83 F. Dives logged 60. Excellent pre-dive briefing. 40 minutes maximum, I still had 1500 PSI left and they made me come up. Had to follow divemaster. Not very impressed. Second dive was a wreck, I thought it was more like a pile of rubble. Service on the boat was very good. (Ph: (340)774-1350; fax (340)777- 8733; e-mail uws@diveusvi.com; website www.diveusvi.com)

LIVE-ABOARDS

THE BAHAMAS

Aqua Cat, July 2001, Walt Brenner (waltbrenner@yahoo.com) Wayne, PA. Vis: 50-80 ft. Water: 87 F. Logged dives: 800. Dive restrictions enforced: 130'. Inaugural cruise a marvelous experience. Food was only mediocre but, but the regular chef was not on board. This Australian designed catamaran has roomy, comfortable ensuite cabins on the same level as the spacious dive deck. Three outside hot showers (and a head), plenty of

hangers, all new dive equipment (steel tanks), two entry ladders in addition to side entry openings, E-6 processing, even an editing suite for videographers. Friendly, cooperative crew. Side trips for exploring and snorkeling were available several times to some of the isolated cays. 4-5 dives a day was the norm and because it was in the Exuma Marine Park, the sea life was unusually profuse and diverse for the Bahamas/Caribbean area. Dived the blue hole within sight of Nassau with a school of juvenile silky sharks in the hole entrance and two very large nurse sharks along the sandy edge. Early on we became quite accustomed to sharks — mostly Caribbean reef sharks with a few nurse sharks and some grays. lots of southern sting rays, yellow spotted rays, several kinds of morays, porcupine and blowfish, many large lobsters (they were out of season), a great octopus experience, and a dozen squids just hanging out. (Ph: 888-327-9600 or 305-888-3002; fax 305.885.3323; e-mail info@aquacatcruises.com; website www.aquacatcruises.com)

Aqua Cat, July 2001, Brad Bowen, Farmington, UT. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm choppy. Diving is mediocre at best, while the boat has the best facilities of any live aboard from which we have dove. Just before leaving we called and were informed that the boat was at the Paradise Harbor Club. The people at the Paradise Harbor Club had never heard of the Aqua Cat, and we were unable

to get a hold of anyone by phone. Our cab went from harbor to harbor, and by asking around we eventually found the boat at the Nassau Harbor Club. Although the rooms are not as spacious as the photo's on their website make it appear, the cabins are larger than those of the Peter Hughes Star Dancer and Sea Dancer. There were three drawers, three closets, one small cabinet and a small fridge. We had adequate space to store our luggage in our cabin. Cabins have picture frame windows and thermostats which worked perfectly. Each suite has its own bathroom, close to twice the size of the bathrooms on the Peter Hughes boats. The food was good. Eggs were only served twice, French toast once. Muffins, fruit and cold cereal for all other breakfasts. Left over bacon and sausage ended up in subsequent lunches and dinners, as did left over cooked vegetables from lunches or dinners. Dinners were generally light on protein and high on carbs, mostly pastas. The same chocolate chip cookies were "dessert" for most lunches and some dinners. Cherry pie was made with canned filling, and Betty Crocker contributed a cake one evening. The regular cook was on vacation. he cook did fulfill a pre-trip special request to have cranberry juice on hand. Beverages were always available, as were animal crackers, pretzels, and hard candy. Beer was always on tap (but I was told by two divers it was a "little flat") and wine was served with all dinners. The camera table is large and allows residual rinse water to drain. The boat has a photo contest to encourage rental

of their camera gear and use of their E6 processing services. You choose a tank, set up your gear, store your extra gear in a bin under your seat and they refill your tank after each dive. Nitrox tanks have green caps, but otherwise look the same as the air tanks. Dive deck is covered in a two tiered set of rubber coated bars, which allows all water to drain away so that you never have a wet or slippery dive deck — an absolutely excellent feature. There are two showers on the dive deck and two showers on the exit platforms. Before diving you move a tag with your name on it from the "on the boat" board to the "in the water" board, a very good safety system which the crew strictly followed even when you forgot to use it. The Aqua Cat is owned by the same people that own Black Beard's Cruises. All of the mooring sites have been in use for quite a while. The first few sites appear to have been in use for well over 20 years as 90% to 95% of the coral and sponges is dead and covered in thick green algae. Some of the crew tried to tell us it was just because they hadn't had a hurricane to clean off the reef in a few years, but a 15 minute swim toward shore and away from the "wall" on a site known as "Shark Reef" revealed a healthy reef was available if you were willing to put forth the effort to swim to it. Good underwater navigation skills and a compass are essential if you want decent diving on many of the sites. A 15 minute swim on the "Wreck of the Austin Smith" revealed a devastated landscape as far as the eye could see and my worst ocean dive ever. The dive site was so poor that we got out

of the water and asked to go on the Sea Dog (power boat) trip to shore for hiking, kayaking and snorkeling. It took an hour and a half, persistent prodding and several talks with the crew, but one of the dive masters finally spoke to the captain and about half of the divers went to shore instead of doing a second dive. We had all been forced to dive this poorest of dive sites (Austin Smith Wreck) was so that one diver could get his wreck certification. It may be that there aren't any "good sites" due to the lack of moorings strong enough to hold a boat as large as the Aqua Cat. There were three good dive sites on this trip: Whale Shark Wall, Three Dogs Wall and Amberjack Reef, although the shallow reef within 100 yards of these moorings is also showing some damage. Amberjack Reef is where they do their shark feed dive. We had six reef sharks and three large black grouper, with lots of yellow tail snapper and other small fish. When all of the food was gone, one of the reef sharks got a little frisky with three divers who were close to the food. These divers had to hit the shark on the nose, head and eyes several times before it left them alone. No one was bitten, but the shark did bite some camera lights that were silver in color and looked a lot like the steel pin through the "chumsickle." One of the captains was free diving from the surface onto the chumsickle to take photos, a practice I thought was foolhardy. A 8' shark intentionally bit and moderately injured the fin of a medium sized (6') shark when they were both going for the food. After the

shark dive I took a compass heading and swam 15 minutes toward shore. Medium profile, untouched reef a short distance from the mooring, but not many fish. Corals are "hammered" on the night dive sites, and the amount of life varied from fairly sparse one night to moderate and abundant, respectively, on two other nights. Aqua Cat did one drift dive over a reef they call "Fire Coral Reef," This site was pristine. The dive is done with the Aqua Cat under power and going against the current. My mask was ripped from my face and almost lost despite my best efforts to hold it to my face with one hand while holding my video camera above my head with the other. Many sites were covered in thick green algae. *Aqua Cat* tows a large motorboat called the "*Sea Dog*," which is configured to dive 20+ divers. It also carries two smaller boats, one of which was used as a dive tender on most, if not all, dives. Aqua Cat should use the *Sea Dog* to travel a half a mile to mile and use it as a diving platform and one of its other boats as an additional dive tender. On some dives the *Sea Dog* could drop divers a reasonable distance from the *Aqua Cat* and allow them to do a drift dive or swim along the wall back to the *Aqua Cat*. On other dives it could pick up divers after they complete their dive.

***Aqua Cat*, August 2001, Allen & Cathy Williams, Abilene, TX.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 85 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, choppy currents. Nice boat. All guest areas are large and spacious. Food was not

gourmet, but was served in large amounts and on time. The diving was very good, although visibility was reduced due to warm water and tide conditions. Strong currents associated with tides on some dives. Sharks every day, many eagle rays, and a large variety, but not great numbers, of reef fish. The boat was filled to capacity — 21 divers — and one dive platform ladder was broken, but we never felt crowded either entering or exiting the water. Crew allowed everyone to dive his or her own profile as long as that individual was back on the boat in time for travel to the afternoon destination. We were issued name tags to post on the “in-water” board then the “on-boat” board so the crew could monitor our whereabouts. Extra trips to fish, hunt lobster, and view iguanas were offered in between dives and sometimes, in lieu of a dive. Docked at Hurricane Hole on Paradise Island, and used the hotel’s swimming pool. Many little shops are located close by, and the huge Atlantis resort looms. After 6:00 pm their aquarium is free to the public. The crew concluded their work week by offering us a wine- tasting and hors d’oeuvres party Friday evening. Aqua Cat is easy and relaxing to live upon. Three-tier table in center of dive deck. Top for cameras, middle for extra camera gear, bottom for all to use. Two large rinse tanks reserved for cameras.

Blackbeard’s Cruises, *Cat Ppalu*, January 2001, Norris Boone, Taylors, SC. Vis: 75-100 ft. Water: 68-72 F. Dives: more than 500. Dive restrictions: 130 ft. The diving was very

good. The crew was helpful. Good descriptions of dive sites. The accommodations were small but adequate. The food was good to excellent. The dive station was good. Once BC on, tank never had to be changed. Wonderful dive experience. **(Ph: (800) 327-9600 or (305) 888-1226; fax (305) 884-4214; e-mail capthook@blackbeard-cruises.com ; website www.blackbeard-cruises.com)**

Blackbeard’s Cruises, *Pirate’s Lady*, March 2001, Bob Jacon, (Sbjacon@aol.com) E. Greenbush, NY. Vis: 10-75 ft. Water: 70-75 F. Dives: 375+. Dive restrictions: 130’. This was camping on the high seas, but I missed the campfires and marshmallows. A dry bag recommendation would have been helpful. The boat was quiet even while motoring. The crew under Ron McCarland and Yolanda Good were always helpful. They made the best of poor weather conditions. You get your money’s worth.

Blackbeard’s Cruises, *Pirate’s Lady*, April 2001, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com) Golden Valley, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. Lot of bang for the buck. I’ve made 12 Gulf Stream crossings on big and small boats, and the weather on this trip eastbound was the worst I’ve encountered. There were 8 foot swells and 12 of the 21 passengers were ill and vomiting topside for the six hour crossing. The rest of the trip was a blast. Fair to good food, good diving, nice drinks/beer and a young energetic and optimistic crew. Nice divemaster and captain, nice engineer and deckhand.

You rent a bunk, NOT a cabin, and you share the head with 4 to 7 other people. The shark dive was a hit, 15 to 20 reef sharks, and other fish. Only downside to this trip: cramped accommodations and unpredictable seas. They run a darn good discount charter.

Gulf Stream Eagle, March 2001, Bill Myers, Pittsburgh, PA. We departed for North Bahamas at 6AM from West Palm Beach, Florida; boarded at 7 PM. Mark Rose and second Capt Rob McDonald. Outstanding trip. Our first dive was at LT reef and was a check-out dive with healthy corals and the usual tropicals. The second dive was at Sherwood Forest, where Capt Mark sometimes does a shark feed. We did it as a non feeding dive. At 50 ft 6-7 reef sharks cruised among divers. There were also cubera snappers, greater amberjacks, cudas, dog snappers. As the divers watched the fish together a nice scalloped hammerhead made a semi circle around all the divers and slowly headed back. The next day 3 great hammerheads (one real big one) came for a visit at Frontierland. Mark kept them around the boat by putting bait in the water for over 2 hours. We snorkeled with them for our surface interval, then did a second dive there. Mark coaxed the big one (13-14 ft) right up to him and the big fellow took some bait right from a spear. The great hammer was like a big lovable St. Bernard, very mellow. At El Captain 5 reef sharks and a bull shark plus a large nurse shark circled among Pompano and greater amberjacks. For the surface interval spotted dolphins put on a GREAT show. We finished

with a shark feed at Sherwood Forest which was well done. Mark's son John did the hand feeding which allowed great photo ops. 6 divers canceled at last minute but he ran the trip with only 6 divers and burned a lot of fuel getting us to the best sites. This boat is not a Peter Hughes *Sun Dancer* but it is comfortable, has good food, a great dive platform and handles the seas well. The crew does not baby sit divers and only leads drift dives but will assist beginners. Gulfstreameagle.com or phone 1800-488-DIVE. (Ph: 800-488-3483 or (561) 575-9800; fax (561) 743-5747; e-mail gseagle@gulfstreameagle.com; website www.gulfstreameagle.com)

Nekton Pilot, September 2000, William S. and Frances I. Ungerman (Elitecorps@aol.com) Santa Ana, CA. 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 100 Feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, calm. Cay Sal Bank itinerary. 1,399, a fabulous deal when you consider you have to fly no further than Fort Lauderdale. 78 feet long, it looks like a trailer floating on a raft. We stayed in Cabin 5 on the Main Deck, but there are some cabins below. Overnighted at the Best Western Marina Hotel where the NP docks. Cabin offers the best space arrangement of any live aboard we've been on. The food was the best Pam, the chef (she rates the title) is a gem. The Pilot is the so called "SWATH" (small water area, twin hull) design, but it rocks and rolls just like any other boat. The US Navy dumped the design concept long ago. They run with the pontoons fully inflated, bringing them close to the surface of the water and

subject to wave action. With the exception of the last two dives off Bimini and the shark feeding dive, the diving was marginal to fair/good on a Caribbean scale. "The Strip" and "Spotted Sands" (patch reefs) were a hotbed of prolific marine life. The shark dive at "Big Hole" was outstanding. Buzzing, torpedoing Caribbean Reef sharks tearing up the Barracuda bait ball. The blue Hole dives were basically a swim around a big hole. One drift dive at Elbow Cay, not bad. Five dives a day. This would be a cattle boat except for the fine crew. The dive deck is narrow and cramped with thirty divers struggling to get in the water at once. Hot tub on the sun deck. Viz horrible on "The Playground" but people got a laugh when a three-foot remora attached himself to my Aeroskin. Air in the low 80's. No towels or wet suits allowed inside boat. Microbes die and fall off which explains the foul smell on most live-aboards. And I always thought it was the plumbing backing up! Popcorn every night and plenty of snacks. Individually controlled A/C. Steel 95 tanks, whip filled. No Nitrox. Practically no engine noise discernible. One small shower on dive deck on a precarious ledge. Dive deck is like an elevator. Watch out for the crane when they move it. Duck or die! Paper-thin walls between cabins if you like to listen to the neighbors. Current on most dives. Mediocre diving must be balanced with the exceptional crew, utterly fabulous cooking and absolute value. This trip is a bit much for beginners and a little too tame for experienced divers. (Ph: (800) 899-6753 or (954) 463-9324;

fax (954) 463-8938; e-mail info@nektioncruises.com; website www.nektioncruises.com)

Nekton Pilot, June 2001, Dawn & Brent Davis, Oakdale, CA. 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 110 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy. The shore staff is very accommodating with pre-dive planning and hotel/travel arrangements. They call you the week before the trip to let you know the water temperatures and forecasted weather. They meet you at the airport and will either provide transportation to the boat or to Los Olas Riverfront for its shopping and entertainment. They will take you to a local liquor store/supermarket (limited amounts of alcohol and soda are charged for on the boat). The owner of the boat (John Dixon) is frequently present to answer questions and meet guests. The crossing to the Bahamas starts at 11:00 pm. There are 3 levels: the dive deck, the salon level and the sundeck. Rooms amenities: fairly spacious rooms with en-suite baths and good quality marine heads, built in shelves and a small area to hang clothes. Separate climate controls and each room has a large window facing out to sea. 6 guest cabins. Avoid room #1 (largest and handicapped accessible) as it is below the sundeck and right under a heavy traffic area. Request a room. #7 is kind of romantic (starboard/front and it has 2 windows to look out of. Room #3 across the hall is similar but will have a little more noise; crew needs to access that area when tying up to the mooring. Rooms on the lower level are a little larger than those on the salon level. Inside

Salon amenities: 2 VCR's, tons of movies, tons of books, many magazines, camera light table, slide projector, slide viewer. Polaroids posted of all the guests to make it easier to get to know the names. Dining on the salon level as are 2 large camera tables, giant coolers and a gear rinse bucket. Sundeck level amenities: Hot tub, kayaks, shaded area behind pilot house, water cooler, storage bins, lounge chairs. There are 2 areas where smoking is permitted. Dive platform amenities: steel 95 tanks (aluminum available, soft weight belts, large bins for accessories, mask-defog and rinse buckets, 2 large cameras-only freshwater rinse buckets. Tanks promptly filled with air after each dive. Nitrox not available. Dive platform raises and lowers hydraulically. 2' Christmas tree' style ladders allow divers to exit the water with fins on or off. Transition deck level amenities: large sign- off/sign-in board and 2 hot water fresh showers. Fresh warm towels after each dive. Boat design supposed to minimize risk for seasickness. Nobody got sick on this trip but it has happened on past trips. Recommend bringing/taking meds if prone to seasickness. Crew will take you on a tour of the 'guts' of the boat upon request. Typical dive day: 6am: continental breakfast 7-8am: hot buffet style breakfast available. 8 am: morning dive site briefing. 8:10 am: "pool is open" for 2 am dives. Steward usually cleans cabins during this time. At times, the dive deck can become crowded. After the first day, people tend to kind of self-monitor the situation and stagger

themselves out so the whole boat is not trying to dive at the same time. Once your gear is set up, you never have to touch it all week. There is a spacious bin under the 2 tanks to store masks and fins etc. 10am: fresh cookies or sheet cake available. 11:45: out of the water. 12:00 Lunch served (hot & cold foods/salads/fruit available). Boat is repositioned for the afternoon dive site. 1pm: afternoon dive briefing (occasionally later if the run to the pm dive site takes longer... but there is always time to do 2 pm dives before dinner). "Pool open" after dive site briefing. 3pm: hot snacks. 5:45 out of the water. 6pm: full dinner/dessert. 7pm: nightly educational presentation/slide show on various topics of interest. 8pm: night dive deck open for 1 night dive. Left over dessert put out for snacks as well as popcorn (a favorite) available. Boat will move at night to the next day's am dive site. Diving is from Sunday am through Friday pm. Boat returns to Ft. Lauderdale Sat. am. Transportation provided to airport or local hotels. safety sausages issued to every diver. Thorough safety briefing. Always 2 staff on board the dive deck as well as 1 designated 'bubble watcher' from the sundeck. Boat has 2 tenders, one of which is in the water during every dive in case a diver misses the boat on the way back or needs assistance to get back to the boat. 2 life rafts, multiple life rings & fire extinguishers. Staff: Friendly and helpful and full of good humor. Gratuities are optional and shared equally amongst crew members. Politely worded letter left in cabins suggesting gratuities.

This staff works plenty hard and really earns them. Food: Plentiful and tasty. Wonderful desserts. Special diets can be accommodated. This report is for the Bahama Adventure Itinerary (one of 3 different itineraries offered). there are 2 opportunities to go ashore, one in Port Lucaya and the other on Bimini (on Friday). They offer the opportunity to participate in a Dan research study every week. Participants wear a specially issued computer and meet for a few minutes with project coordinator every evening. Website: <http://www.nektoncruises.com>. Many dive sites are not suitable for snorkeling because of depth and often there is no opportunity to take snorkelers to an alternate location by tender. On the dive platform there are 2 large fresh water rinse buckets devoted to cameras/videos only. Dive staff will hand cameras to you directly (if entering dive site at the back of the dive platform) or by carabiner on rope (if you decide to enter off of the side of the dive platform). Staff very careful and protective of photographers equipment. On main deck level there are 2 large stable camera tables that camera gear may be left on all week. High pressure air hose available. There is an onboard photo pro available for instruction in still (Nikonos equip. only) photography or video photography. Camera and video equip available for rent by the dive/week. E-6 processing available at \$10/roll. I had 2 rolls of film that experienced trouble in the developing tank and lost the first 6 pictures, but was compensated with no charge for the developing as well as replacement film. Test rolls

were subsequently done to see if it was a 1 time problem (yes) and subsequent rolls developed without a glitch. Inside the salon there are 2 large light tables as well as an approx. 8 by 8 inch viewing box available so that one may use to preview their slides. There are 2 VCR's available also for videographers.

Nekton Pilot, June 2001, Stewart M. Kaslow, Maplewood, NJ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 92 F, choppy. A great boat for those that are hesitant about going on a live aboard. Cabins have controls for airco, toilets and showers in each. Food is very good and often. Special diets observed. The dive crew is enthusiastic, with informed, and detailed dive briefings. Night dives offered most nights but always at the same site one was able to dive in the afternoon. Weight belts provided with soft weights that velcro on. 100 cu ft tanks standard, smaller available. No Nitrox.

Nekton Pilot July 2001, Alex R. Portelli (alpo@topsurf.com) APO, AE. Experience: 101-250 dives Vis: 75 to 200 Feet. Water: 85 to 90 F, calm. Great experience. Bahamas Adventure itinerary. Captain Ephey and his crew were fabulous and obviously have fun together. Although we had a couple of days with slight currents, diving offered beginners and experienced a broad spectrum of comfortable diving. Mini walls, dive throughs, wreck dives (deep and shallow) and a chance encounter with 3 dolphin that played with all of us for more than an hour were some of the highlights. Nondivers had a great time

snorkeling and, when the Pilot was moored at deep dive sites, were often taken by Zodiac to shallow reef areas. Guests were provided nightly educational slide shows by John who did a great job in passing along his knowledge of the marine habitat. Onboard accommodations were excellent. En suite cabins and heads that were cleaned daily by the crew. Food was excellent and Arminda the cook never let anyone go hungry. Special meals are available to those with allergies. Fresh baked cookies, fruit and juices were always available. We traveled from Germany to do this trip and the front office was fabulous in their support, frequently e-mailing and calling to make sure that there were no problems. E6 processing on board. Rinse tables with fresh water and air are available one level up from dive deck. This cleaning station setup is a great idea as it precludes inadvertent damage to cameras. Crew passes camera to you after you have entered the water and takes camera from you before reboarding, immediately placing gear into dive deck fresh water tanks that are reserved for UWP gear. Color coded rinse buckets differentiate between camera and regular gear rinse tanks. Light tables and slide projectors are available and there is a weekly photo contest. Winners have their photos posted to the Nekton website. Several of the crew are UWP pros and are always willing to help out with tips and UPW rentals onboard.

Sea Fever, August 2000, Mike and Ronne Cosel (cosel@juno.com)
Setauket, NY. Vis: 75-100 ft. Water:

84-86 F. Pack light, but women should have one comfortable sun dress. Bring a sun hat and a tee shirt you can wear to snorkel so you don't get a burn on your back. The opportunity to make many dives a day, consecutively over a week is seductive but tiring. If you need particular food or drink make arrangements beforehand or bring it with you. Mark your gear and bring spare parts. The accommodations are comfortable but the crew is stupendous. The cook, Redman, is creative and accommodating, providing excellent meals that taste as good as they look and lots of snacks between dives. The variety of food was great and it was all prepared well. The two Captains we've had occasion to sail with were both knowledgeable and we felt secure with them at the helm even when facing dicey weather (which we did on one of our trips). The dive masters and other crew members aboard were all helpful, friendly, knowledgeable and accommodating (even when various guests were struck down by the seasick bug). I require assistance with my tank getting in and out of the water because of back problems — they provided it with a smile. Although we have only been diving 2 years, we have had occasion to make approximately 80 dives. The trips that stand out most in my memory are the 2 we took on the *Sea Fever*. (Ph: (800) 443-3837 or (757) 481-9116; fax (757) 481-2075; e-mail seafever@seafever.com; website www.seafever.com)

Sea Fever, March 2001, Bob Lamberton (rdflamber@artsci.wustl.edu), St.

Louis, MO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Western Bahamas itinerary from Miami Beach zips you across the Gulf Stream 50 miles to Bimini and some very fine diving, rich in numbers and variety of fish. The boat is basic, but comfortable, the dive operation relaxed and accommodating. 2 1/2 out of the projected 5 1/2 days of diving were a virtual washout because of SW winds. Bimini has no dive sites that are protected from this, with the exception of the Sapona Wreck — on the Bimini Bank in 15 fsw — the only site offered on Day 1 and Day 4. (I snorkeled it on Day 4 after recording a max depth of 16 ft on Day 1.) In theory, this trip is rerouted to Chub Cay and/or North Andros in these conditions, but our captain hung around Bimini, spending two nights at the dock (thus further limiting our options, since we could come and go only at high tide). A Blackbeard's boat was around for part of the week, and seemed to have more success getting its divers into the water. Our captain was an enjoyable raconteur and guide (we all learned which houses Richard Nixon and Bibi Rebozo once occupied on Cat Cay) but nobody knew from one hour to the next what he planned to do. On Day 6, we left the shelter of Cat Cay and bobbed around for a few minutes near the wall before he slammed his way through the Gulf Stream for an early arrival in Miami Beach. Fourteen dives in a week on a live-aboard is just not enough. Much of what we did dive, though, was truly outstanding, with plenty to satisfy the dedicated fish watcher. After nearly

200 Caribbean dives, I saw Sargassum triggerfish for the first time and found it common below 65 ft. on the South Cat Cay Wall. Off North Bimini, we snorkeled with the famous Spotted Dolphins. They also include their own version of the traditional Bahamas shark-feed at a spot called "Shark Pit" south of S. Cat Cay. I'm no fan of this activity — like visiting the dump to watch the bears, it degrades those magnificent animals to see them in this context — but the Sea Fever crew (led by the friendly chef) do a good job of it. The walls west of the Biminis, washed by the Gulf Stream, all had water in the 80's in March, comfortable in a shorty or less, but the Sapona, up on the bank, was in chilly 70-72 degree water.)

Sea Fever, May 2001, Larry & Fawn Lovecchio, Ignacio, CO. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 78-80 F. Our first live-aboard experience was in the waters northwest of Grand Bahama Island. Diving on pristine reefs with massive healthy coral mounds reaching some 50' off the sand bottom was an absolute pleasure. The fish population was large and diverse which included a 5' cubera snapper, dog snapper, large tiger, black and Nassau groupers, curious large French and gray angels, ceros mackerel, schools of Atlantic spadefish, horseye and crevally jacks, the omnipresent large barracudas, reef sharks, and even a couple of juvenile pompano sporting their streamers. squadron of six large crevally jacks chased a six foot reef shark up and down the reef on one dive. Surface intervals were spent

snorkeling with spotted or bottlenose dolphins on the White Sand Ridge of the Little Bahama Bank. Several outstanding dive sites included “El Dorado” with its busy reef and healthy barrel sponges and the half dozen or more resident reef sharks; “Mt. Olympus” with its nice walls and abundant black coral; and night diving on the shallow “Sugar Wreck” where we encountered massive 5' loggerhead turtles with large remoras attached resting among the debris. The Sea Fever is a 95' converted oil field transport and supply ship which carries six crew and up to fifteen guests. We had half the guests.

Although the sleeping quarters are small, most of the guests spent their surface time on the upper sun deck or in the galley where there was always some delectable treat. Red, the chef works wonders and his dinners are works of art. Prepare to come back a few pounds heavier! The Capt. is quite capable and crew personable and interesting and always willing to help.

Sea Fever, May 2001, Bill McGrath (zippy@bikerider.com) Chandler, AZ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm. The boat, a 90 foot converted oil rig tender, was fast but somewhat noisy with an aluminum hull. Large stern-mounted platform for easy water exits. The crew was excellent and couldn't do more for you. Good food: tuna steaks, leg of lamb, prime rib, plus salads, veggies and a starch. The real surprise was the diving: the most pristine reefs I've ever encountered.

We spent six days at the banks, and saw only one other dive boat on one day. Did some blue holes, coral patches, steep walls, shark dives, saw dolphin and a few turtles. Lots of small reef fish. They had a dedicated camera table, large camera rinse bucket, helped with in and out.

Sea Fever, May 2001, Kevin Reeser (k.reeser@verizon.net) Bloomington, IL. Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 35 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Sea Fever for their Grand Bahama trip in mid May and July for their Cay Sal Bank itinerary. The boat is an old but well cared for. The original owner is one of the captains. The decor and furnishing show wear. She is kept clean and in top shape. Virtually only one bathroom with shower for the passengers. The toilet looks like it's on a pedestal. A little awkward if you have to stand to pee. If you're over 6'2" you'll be vertically challenged. There is one toilet on the main deck off the main diving setup area. The other bathroom with toilet and shower is in the lower forward area where the crew resides and one guest cabin. Cabins are small and narrow with very little storage. When you shower at night put on fresh swim trunks sleep in those, and when you get up you're ready for the day. I referred to the cabins as coffins because they're so tight and when you turn out the light it is pitch black (no windows). The bathroom with shower is narrow but adequate. She can rock from side to side in choppy water. Bring your motion sickness medication. The dive deck is very well laid

out with adequate space. Dive gear is stored underneath your seat where you slide into your BC. They refill the tanks using a whip system. Nitrox is produced by a membrane system. It was usually just under 32%. Tanks are aluminum 80s filled to 3000 psi. Hangers for wet suits, one 50 gallon can for rinsing gear (refilled daily) and another one strictly for camera equipment. There is 1 camera table with 4 carpeted shelves. At the rear of the dive deck there is 1 fresh water and 1 saltwater hose. Giant stride entries from the sides. They'll carry your gear down to the rear platform if you need to slide in. They keep a small inflatable with motor in the water to pick you up if you need it. Although they advertise drift diving I sometimes had to push them to do this on my Grand Bahamas trip. (I was tired of finning against current for 30 minutes and drifting back to the boat in about 5.) They accommodated me on one dive but it took some ear bending. Staff is pretty good, polite and nice. Communicate diving expectations on the first day. No nurse maids on the Sea Fever. They asked you to observe 130 feet max depth. No time limits, no buddy rules, etc. You are on your own to dive your own profile. Food was top notch. Red has been with the Sea Fever for 1-1/2 years. Not real fancy but always tasty and good portions. 2nds were available. Soft drinks are provided. You can take your own beer or booze on board. They have coolers and a good ice maker. On my Grand Bahamas trip we saw several reef sharks, most big, a few nurse sharks, and one great

hammerhead. We snorkeled with several bottle nose and spotted Atlantic dolphins. Reefs were OK, a few had considerable algae growth above the 50' level. Visibility varied from 40 feet to 90 feet. On my Cay Sal Banks trip we dived on 3 blue holes and no more (probably because some of the adventurers were exceeding the 130 foot limit by 2 fold). Several black tip sharks at the holes along with several sting rays, and an eagle ray. The holes are a few hours journey from the North where the walls are. The wall diving was beautiful. Moderate currents allowing all of these as drift dives. In the evenings we would tie off to a mooring line next to a rock island and do our evening dive and then our night dive. One day we went ashore to see an light house abandoned many years ago. Some of the Cuban boat people use this island as safe place, which explains the daily low flying inspections from the US Coast Guard. Great deal for the price! Pack light, bring some rum, your motion sickness medication, and communicate groups expectations at the beginning of the trip.

BELIZE

Belize Aggressor III, October 2000,
Terry Wilenksy (lov2div@hotmail.com)
Phillips Ranch, CA. Vis: 70-100 ft.
Water: 81-85 F. Dives logged: 400+.
Dive restrictions: 130' max. I have been on 4 live-aboards. This was the best captain and dive crew. Boat in excellent shape, diving very good. Could dive up to 5 dives almost every day. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; fax 985-384-0817; e-mail