

and of a sweet and accommodating temperament, the folks from socioeconomic areas that do not even approach having the amenities we take for granted, have a difficult time relating to our idea of customer comfort. A lot more training is required on even basic tasks like making a bed and not picking up dirty dishes as a main priority when guests are eating. This should not be on the job training. The diving was very comfortable and safe. Weather was very kind, visibility a good 80 feet on most dives. Fauna was varied but not abundant. No big critters except for a pod of dolphins, giving some excited divers, turned snorkelers, a rare opportunity of about ten minutes to observe the pod within just a few feet. Threatening weather kept us away from South Caicos, and we missed the main reason for picking this dive venue. I think that the powers to be must provide more varied dive spots or moorings, as we dove some sites more than once because of the inability to go to South Caicos. Crew turnover meant their knowledge of the individual dive sites is limited in comparison with their shore based brethren, who live there year around. I use the Transderm Scop patch to reduce the risk of seasickness. Tends to fall off after a dive or during the post dive shower. Although not very classy, covering the patch with a small piece of duct tape, keeps it on as long as necessary.

**Wind Dancer, August 2001, Bob Lamberton**  
(rdlamber@artsci.wustl.edu) **St. Louis, MO.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 82

to 86 F, choppy. Picked up a last-minute cabin, heavily discounted, on this trip that has been criticized in the Chapbook for lack of variety. Peter Hughes has responded to that criticism and added tenders that permit diving more sites at South Caicos. We had perfect August weather and were able to dive the Grand Turk Wall as well as Salt Cay and South Caicos — plenty of variety, and some of the best wall diving in the Caribbean (especially South Caicos, with Reef Sharks on most of our 6 dives). Our sixth live-aboard trip, first with Peter Hughes, and we were impressed. We've generally opted for more adventure and less luxury (the Fling, two Red Sea boats) but we enjoyed being spoiled. Tony the chef is a genius. Every meal was outstanding and carefully thought out, and not overly rich. Burning up calories at the rate consumed by 4 to 5 dives a day, I have little restraint at meals, but I didn't gain an ounce. Dive supervision is available, and briefings exemplary, but experienced divers are left to do as they please by a highly professional staff.

## UNITED STATES Texas

### Flower Garden Banks

**MV Fling, July 2000, Jimmy Payne**  
(payne@worldnetfla.net) **Fort Polk, LA.** Vis: 70-80 ft. Water: 82-83 F. Dive restrictions: 100 ft. depth limit. Great operation for power diving, 7 dives on 2 day trip. Accommodations aren't the Ritz, but more than adequate for the purpose of the trip. Excellent divemasters and crew. Stresses safety

and protecting the sanctuary. (Ph: 979-233-4445; fax 979-233-0040; e-mail [info@rinnboats.com](mailto:info@rinnboats.com); website [www.rinnboats.com](http://www.rinnboats.com))

***MV Fling, August 2000, Gary Grafa, Sherman, TX.*** Vis: 75-90 ft. Water: 80-84 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: 100 ft. max., 2 hour surface interval. Trip booked to view coral spawning. Amazing event. Boat arranged Marine biologist to speak prior to spawning dive. Lots of dives over short period of time, nitrox available. All dives are over 65-70 feet in depth. Weather unpredictable and trip may cancel at last minute. [www.rinnboats.com](http://www.rinnboats.com).

***MV Fling, October 2000, David Rosen (Drosen4@Compuserve.com) Chesterfield, MO.*** Vis: 35-75 Ft. Water: 77-79 F, choppy. We left Friday night and dove Sat. and Sun. A well run, friendly operation. Accommodations are Spartan. You need to be at the dock in Freeport by 9:00 p.m. The drive from the Houston International airport can be over two hours. Water was warm and clear with 3-5 foot swells. Some people had motion sickness. Nitrox was reasonable. The dive deck handles 30 divers with a decent size camera table and two rinse buckets devote to cameras. Entry is by giant stride at the side entrances, 7' above the water camera were lowered by rope. Good pre-dive talks and well thought out procedures. You give your bunk number before you enter the water, and when you come back on the boat. A second check is made when all are on the boat. We saw lots of turtles, barracuda (at cleaning stations), small

reef fish, and a 15-20' whale shark which stayed with us for over an hour and allowed close contact. This is a good value for a quick dive trip, and the whole crew were great.

***MV Fling, July 2001, Steve Neal, Fairfield, TX.*** Vis: 50-80 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dives logged: 204. Dive restrictions enforced: 100 ft. max., no deco, return with air. My second time. Due to problems on prior trips, if you exceed 100' you are through for the trip (not just the day). Same thing come up with zero air, through for the trip. Nitrox available, good camera table. Showers on back after gear off. Sundek or salon between dives. Arrive 7 am, dive, 2.5 hrs. out, dive 2.5 hrs. out, dive, 2.5 hrs. out dive, wait till dark — night dive, 5 dives a day. Two day trip  $5 + 3 = 8$  dives, 3 days  $5+5+3=13$  dives. Supposed to rig dive on way back but skipped for some lame excuse. Tiny, tiny, rooms 4 bunks, barley room for one to dress. Food tolerable and always snacks, water and juice available. Several sharks and turtles seen. No mantas or whale sharks this trip.

***MV Fling, August 2001, Ron and Sherry Smith, Levittown, PA.*** Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 80-84 F, strong currents. Dive restrictions: 100 ft. The M/V Fling and M/V Spree leave out of Freeport at 9 pm Friday to get to the Flower Gardens Saturday morning (6 am). At 3 am Sunday morning they move to Stetson Bank. The average dives were 70-90 feet with 3 rules — do not go below 100 ft., have 500 psi at end of dive, and one beer and done diving for the day. Surface currents were strong and you had to follow a side line to the

mooring line, to the bottom. Once at bottom, the current was slower. Flower Gardens was okay with coral and fish life, but Stetson Bank was much better with tons of tropical fish. The 100 foot live-aboards are converted crew boats that are comfortable, but not fancy. Divers share bunk room accommodations (46 bunks/room) heads, and shower facilities. The trip was not expensive. The crew and divemasters were very courteous. The food was great and lots of it.

***Sea Searcher II*, March 2001, Mark Walden (dfwmw@aol.com) Garland, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 67 to 71 F, calm. Schooling hammerheads, tiger shark, manta and the general mixture of reef fish. The reef is healthy and alive. The Sea Searcher II has three new overhauled engines and can do 22 kts. New camera table along center of dive deck has plenty of room for cameras and storage. (Ph: 800 396 DIVE or 972-524-6820; e-mail [dive4kixx@aol.com](mailto:dive4kixx@aol.com); website [www.geocities.com/seasearcherii](http://www.geocities.com/seasearcherii))

***Sea Searcher II*, August & September 2001, Mark Walden (dfwmw@aol.com) Garland, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 105 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy. I went on both coral spawn trips, August and September. The Sea Searcher II went out when other boats canceled or delayed the trip. Jim Hart with Oceanographic Expeditions correctly picked the spawn times both trips. We witnessed the spawn two nights on both trips with most of the

activity occurring around 9:45pm. Amazing event.

***Sea Searcher II*, September 2001, Harold Rudinger, Avinger, TX.** Vis: 100-150 ft. Water: Choppy, strong currents, 82-86 F. Dives logged: 3,000+. Dive restrictions: Max. depth 130 ft.; return with 500 psi. Texas Flower Gardens. Coral spawn 120-mile ride. Rougher weather than predicted by NOAA. Should have brought rain coat and warmer clothes. Boat air conditioner freezing. Storms, waves and currents limited diving. Great crew, treat you like family, safe diving stressed. Sodas free, plenty of snacks. Beer \$1.50. No diving after drinking.

***MV Spree*, September 2000, Cristie Cantor, Waskom, TX.** One hundred ft. live aboard, great crews, lots of food. Great diving for the Gulf of Mexico. Includes 400 ft. rig dive and Stetson Bank 220 ft. wall with big pelagics. Three feet seas at times. Not very quiet when engine runs. Tank air fills onboard for continuous dives. Climbing ladders difficult when seas are rough. Accommodating crew, captains and divemasters. Lots of fish life: eagle rays, sharks, barracuda, brain coral, groupers, angels, turtles, puffers, mantas, whale sharks. (Ph: 979-233-4445; fax 979-233-0040; e-mail [info@rinnboats.com](mailto:info@rinnboats.com); website [www.rinnboats.com](http://www.rinnboats.com))

***MV Spree*, June 2001, Mike Szathmary (szorro@scubadiving.com), Greer, SC.** Experience: 101- 50 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 80 F, calm. Spartan as live-aboards go, but clean and comfortable. Even though the seas

were relatively flat, some people were unable to dive because of seasickness. Most interesting dive was the oil rig-full of fish. Crew was outstanding and very attentive to safety. Someone would ask you how you felt after every dive and record your response on a log sheet. Briefings were excellent. Crew would check you in and out on every dive by bunk number. Boat takes 30 divers and it gets a little crowded with that many people, especially when some are sick.

**MV Spree, Rinn Boats, Inc., August 2001, Mike Giles (mikescuba@xspedius.net), Lake Charles, LA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 90 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. Trip is subject to last minute cancellation or shortening due to inclement weather. Complete refunds are given for canceled trips and a generous one is provided for shortened trips. The fully air conditioned boats have Spartan but clean and functional accommodations. Four hot meals per day. Snacks and fresh fruit with ice and beverages 24 hours per day. The courteous crew was prepared and willing to provide information or assistance with dive gear in need of repair. Dive briefings were excellent and conducted by a divemaster who had just emerged from the water, providing up to the minute information on visibility, currents and any unusual critters. A night dive was the highlight. Several silky sharks, lots of barracuda, two large green turtles, a large porcupine fish, spotted morays and a couple of spiny lobsters. The day dives (7 over two days) provided more sharks

(including two whale sharks), lots of barracuda, two mantas, more green turtles, amberjacks and scores of the usual reef denizens. The weather was excellent with air in the low 90's and water in the mid 80's. All dives between 70 and 100 feet and, possible currents and open ocean entries and exits, so not for novices. In deep mid ocean you never know what will come drifting up. Good mixture of large and small subjects. Lack of current at the bottom made positioning easy. Large dedicated rinse tanks. 110 volt current available for recharging batteries and a television with hookup available for viewing video.

**MV Spree, August 2001, Jim N. Parkhill, Edinburg, TX.** Dives logged: 475. Dive restrictions enforced: Depth, no decompression dives. Vis: 50-90 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Surprisingly good diving one hundred miles off the Texas coast. The Flower Gardens are truly a garden of coral formations with a nice assortment of reef fish, barracuda and the occasional pelagic. Cruising silky sharks on three dives. The Stetson Banks are primarily salt domes with little coral, but greater abundance and variety of marine life than the Flower Gardens. Throw in a couple of rig dives and this 2-3 trip offers an interesting mix of dive experiences. The two Rinn boats have had a difficult year with respect to accidents. However, this should not be interpreted as a negative reflection on the safety consciousness. Some gung ho divers complain that many requirements are too restrictive (e.g. maximum depth of 100 feet, no decompression

dives, dive buddy mandatory, no alcoholic beverages between dives, etc.). However, these restrictions do not encroach on the enjoyment of the diving. The trip is not for novice or divers who are not very physically fit. Seas can kick up in a hurry, strong currents can whip up on short notice and the currents can switch during a dive. Square profiles beginning at 80 or 90 feet require close monitoring of computers and air consumption. Not dive master lead dives. The crew was efficient, helpful or fun. Diver's equivalent to "camping out". The cabins are cramped, the two bathrooms very much in demand among the 30 odd divers and the dining area is basic. Yet the dive deck and sun deck are spacious, the food plentiful and wholesome.

***MV Spree, August 20001, John and Edith Summey, Carbondale, IL.***

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 87 F, calm no currents. In 1998, my husband and I went on a double trip on the M/V Spree, Freeport, TX, for 7 days for the coral spawn on the Flower Gardens Marine Sanctuary and Stetson Banks. We had a wonderful time. This August we booked 7 days during this year's coral spawn. We were sorely disappointed by a series of deviations from the previous policies and procedures and behavior by the crew. We suffered through the entire seven days before we could escape the hostile environment that developed. Fills for our Nitrox pony bottles were denied. Our 19-cubic foot pony bottles were filled with air on the previous trip with no problem. We had seen the notice that

now the Spree provides its own Nitrox tanks and would not fill diver-owned Nitrox tanks. But, nothing was mentioned about pony bottles. No reason for denial, just, "it's the RULE!" We were told that the pony bottles could be filled with air. BUT, if we used any of the air in the pony, it would be viewed as an emergency and we would be treated as though we had incurred an out-of-air situation regardless of the psi in the main tank and would be required to sit out the next dive. Furthermore, if any air at all were used during the dive, all subsequent dives would have to be dived using air settings on our computer instead of Nitrox settings. Violate the 100-foot depth limit and you don't dive for the rest of the trip. We were ordered to follow the tag line along the side of the boat down to the mooring line and to the U-bolt at the bottom and to ascend the same way. The first 80 feet or so of the line was buoyed to the surface so that it was impossible to immerse and avoid facing surface current or chop. Likewise, on the ascent, the line was sometimes slack and caused radical bouncing in the 15-foot range and not allowing a constant depth for the safety stop. Also, the camera line was 15 feet deep at the back of the boat requiring descent from the tag line to get to it. We considered this arrangement to be unsafe and did not come back to the ladder via the line but rather swam at a constant depth to a down line by the camera line and ladder. We were scolded several times. We were told that to come up

without a buddy would result in cancellation of dives. This is not an unusual requirement, but the penalty is. We were required to show our computers to the divemaster checking in the returning divers. They did not trust our verbal report. The Spree did not provide divemasters in the water or anyone who would monitor the skill or progress of the divers. Tanks were only filled to 2800 psi at best. When more Nitrox was requested, the crew became argued about what constituted a full tank. A mandatory 2 hour and 30 minute surface interval was imposed for the first part of the week. On one day, 5 dives were achieved. On the second segment, a 3-hour time was imposed even though only 4 dives were done on any single day. The dive times and profiles (70-90-foot square) for the two segments were similar. On several occasions, the SIT became a "count down" to the very minute when the next dive would be allowed.

Attendance at dive briefings was mandatory. Presence or absence for a dive briefing seemed to be measured in how many feet the diver was standing from the divemaster giving the briefing. A diver ready before the correct time was scolded for being too early. The window was usually only 15 minutes in which to accommodate up to 30 divers. There had been four recent incidents of DCS (excluding the two during this week) and one lost diver. These events had motivated the owner, Gary Rinn to impose new tough restrictions and penalties for violations. The crew was under pressure to enforce these policies rigidly.

***MV Spree, August 2001, Robert Don Brinson, Bloomfield, IN.*** I was a trip leaders with Indiana Scuba and can't say enough good things about the crew of the Spree. Capt. Frank gave all of the divers their briefing of the boat and the rules: go below 100 ft. you are done for the trip, come up with no air in your tank you are done for the trip, come up without you buddy and you are done for the trip and no beer after midnight. The trip leaders in charge of the tank fills took as long as they could as to not have hot fills, usually about 2 + hours to refill the tanks. The crew goes out of there way to make sure all safety requirements are followed and the food was great.

## VENEZUELA

### Isla la Tortuga

***Kulkuri, Horisub Dive Resort, March 2001, The Henke Family, Wichita, KS*** Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 78-79 degrees. Dive restrictions: 130 ft and 500 psi. Dive your own profile: yes. Isla La Tortuga is the second largest Venezuelan island. The surface area of La Tortuga extends over 155-square kilometers (80% as large as Aruba). The Kulkuri is a beautiful sailing ship. She is 80-ft long, 2-masted schooner. Her hull, masts and sails were made in Finland in 1991. The interior cabins and other extensive woodwork were completed in Venezuela. The Kulkuri is loaded with all the modern electronic navigation aids, but the Captain sails her the old-fashioned way most of the time. The cabins, showers, dining area and