

you slide out of your harness. An easy kick with your fins and you are seated on the platform. The rinse bucket for my camera was nothing fancy (a large tub), but was adequate. If there was another camera user on the boat, they put out a second tub. On all dive days but one, there were four divers including myself. One day there were nine. The other eight divers were crew from a cruise ship, three working on their AOW. The owners asked if I minded (which I didn't) and made sure that I was in the water first. 75% of the people I dove with were 'Islanders'. Once they saw my diving abilities, they afforded me diving freedom and they never told me when to come up. Aitch, being an underwater photographer, understood my needs and was accommodating. Sean and Aitch research the history of the area and are constantly looking for new wrecks. (Ph: 340-774 2001; e-mail diveusvi@islands.vi; website www.blueislanddivers.com)

LIVE-ABOARDS

THE BAHAMAS

Aqua Cat, July 2001, Juli Tracy/
Dick Gamble, San Diego, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 85 to 89 F, calm. The crew was friendly, the rooms were big and had lots of storage space, modern heads, everything was clean and new. The food was good, and plentiful — lots of chocolate chip cookies after

every dive! The lounge is beautiful, big and comfortable, though often too cold, especially after a dive. (This also made the food cold, since the lounge was the dining room — maybe an infrared lamp would help.) Diving was off the boat and varied, from beautiful walls to coral gardens, a blue hole, and even a shark dive (though we didn't like that much; there were dives when sharks were just there without being fed, and those were better). The dive deck is spacious, and floored with rubber tubing, so it's soft on the feet and non-slippery. Large photo tables and two rinse tanks for photo gear and two shower heads to rinse off, then on the dive deck itself, two enclosed (big) showers, with soap and shampoo. Showers in the room too. Cabin, #11, is much less nice than the others — it has bunk beds instead of twins or a queen, has little floor space and hardly any storage, and doesn't have a nice picture window, but only a skylight which people on the deck above can see into. This would be fine, if the price for that cabin were reduced, but it's not, and so those people really got a bad deal. (Ph: 888-327-9600 or 305-888-3002; fax 305-885-3323; e-mail info@aquacatcruises.com; website www.aquacatcruises.com)

Aqua Cat, November 2001, Joe Puglia (JPuglia@aol.com) Orlando, FL Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 70 to 78 F, calm. The boat was comfortable with nice size rooms with full size ensuite facilities. Showers on the dive deck were great. Our week followed a hurricane; there was much sand on the

reef and visibility was mediocre. The boat was great to dive from, plenty of room on the dive deck with lots of storage space. The briefings were done well. The one drink and your done rule was in effect so I missed most of the night dives that were after dinner and my glass of wine. This problem could be avoided by eating dinner after the night dive was complete. Most times night divers felt rushed at dinner. Diving in Exumas and Eleuthra was Bahamas diving, not as colorful as the southern Caribbean, but we ran into some nice sized turtles and good sized rays. Most of the diving is wall diving. Don't expect Palau but the diving is still fun and convenient. Captain Mark's crew made our week enjoyable. The food was good and plentiful and the beer was on tap! Nice area to keep cameras. We had more cameras than the crew had ever seen on one trip and they all fit! The group was from a housing manufacturer....lots of cameras!

Aqua Cat, December 2001, Ed & Jeanette Raver, Tijeras, NM. Water: 76 F. Our 7th liveaboard and we were pleased with the operation, diving, land options, quarters, amenities. This boat is not opulent but is everything that one could need. Saw a hammerhead. Food was a bit bland. Great crew, knowledgeable, attentive, skilled.

Aqua Cat, June 2002, Lyle Helm, Calhoun, GA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, choppy no currents. Matt the cook catered to dietetic needs from

vegan to carnivore with a good variety of food. Cookies, muffins or fresh fruit after each dive. Up to five dives per day were mostly varied and excellent. The shark feed was well attended by sharks and groupers, and divers! The wall dives at Dog Rocks and the Cathedral were spectacular with plate corals, sponges, black coral and good variety of reef fish and several visits by spotted eagle rays and gray reef sharks. Dive deck well laid out with only negative being lack of enough rack space to hang wet suit/skins. Warm fresh water showers at both swim platforms and two enclosed showers on dive deck. Tanks filled with air or Nitrox typically to 2800 psi in your choice of size 63, 80, and 100 cf alum. Capt. Mark and crew have a great attitude and will do about anything to help or accommodate (including helping rebuild a leaking 1st stage)! Gave the beginners all the help they wanted and gave the experienced divers all the freedom they wanted. Accommodations comfortable with private baths in all rooms. Catamaran design smooth riding and comfortable even in choppy seas. Excellent trip for our group of 24. Separate camera rinse tanks and storage/work areas with air hose handy. Also, protected battery charging shelf close by. Crew usually handy to pass cameras in and out of the water at dive ladder.

Aqua Cat, June 2002, Mike Szathmary (szorro@scubadiving.com), Greer, SC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. The boat and crew were

top notch. Boat — well laid out, large and roomy, full of amenities. Enough variety for just about any type of diver except maybe wreck divers. We had shallow coral gardens like the Keys, swim throughs like Cozumel, walls like Turks and Caicos, shark dives, blue holes. Fish life was not prolific, but I saw many things you would expect. Green algae was thick in some locations that made the reefs drab. Great trip.

Avalon, February 2002, Paula Felver (paula@felver.com) Hamilton, IN.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 75 Feet. Water: 73 to 75 F, calm currents. The crossing from Miami to Bimini was choppy. The first day we held up at Bimini and enjoyed the night life. The second day everyone dove. Captain John mixed sites that allowed both the beginners and advanced divers to dive. The shark dive was exciting with several large reef sharks and nurse sharks. Night dive at Grotto (Mail boat wreck): two octopi, a large nurse shark seemed interested in my dive light. A spotted eel, a southern stingray and a couple of lobster. 11 passengers and 4 crew. The capacity is 12 passengers. We ran out of water one evening but by morning we had plenty of water for showers. I wish I knew how rough the crossing was going to be. I would have put the sea sickness patch on early. The trip back to Miami was relaxed. (Ph: 800-478-2029 or 954-720-0475; e-mail info@boat-charters.tv; website <http://www.boat-charters.tv/yachts/bahamas/index.htm>)

Blackbeard's, Morningstar, March 2002, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com) Golden Valley, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy. Discount price attracts a variety of clients. A five-person construction crew from the south received this trip as their Christmas bonus, and spent the average day wrapped in blankets sleeping on the deck (blocking access to the equipment lockers and making it difficult to walk across the boat), only to arise at 3pm and begin drinking beer, which continued until 4am each night, much to the dismay of the passengers who actually took the trip to dive. Many were quite hung-over and irritable from 7am to 3pm, often refusing to move from their topside sleeping spots even to allow the crew to handle lines, or to allow other passengers to navigate from one end of the boat to the other. One member of this group urinated on the first mate in the middle of the night and another screamed at the cook (the captain's wife) in the middle of the night. The captain and crew did their best to deal with them, and the captain actually warned them in a public announcement that he had permission from the home office to abandon them in Bimini. This warning did serve to calm them somewhat, but they still managed to drink an astonishing quantity of alcohol, and one actually drank for 17 hours nonstop. The shouting, screaming, profane language and stereo blasting made it difficult for the diving passengers to sleep, despite repeated polite requests for

them to drink quietly. The first mate openly told the group he was concerned for their safety, particularly during a moderately rough east bound gulf stream crossing, which did not stem their alcohol consumption in the least. This was their second Blackbeard's trip, and they had taken precautions to bring a large quantity of their own alcohol, since they had consumed all of the alcohol on the boat by the midpoint of their previous trip. Blackbeard's might need to rethink their alcohol policy, and perhaps consider a curfew on drinking, given the close quarters on their boats, and the potential for injury. I did enjoy the trip, being a sound sleeper, and the dive sites in the Bimini area are surprisingly good and varied. (Ph: 800-327-9600 or 305-888-1226; e-mail capthook@blackbeard-cruises.com; website www.blackbeard-cruises.com)

Blackbeard's, *Pirates Lady*, December 2001, Ted Gold, Huntington Beach, CA. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 25 to 100 Feet. Water: 74 to 78 F, choppy currents. The adventure of camping at sea, the diving (17 dives — best dives "Miami Rita," "Yellow Brick Road," "Blue Chrome," "The Strip," "Rainbow Alley"). Shark dive is well handled and exciting. Dive briefings and DM were great. Crew wonderful under tough conditions, horrible crossing with 8-10' swells and 40 mph winds! Do not pack much or you will sleep with it! No storage other than your bunk. Wish I had known how bad the crossing would

be. Admittedly I was fine after the first eight hours but man I was horribly sick and praying for death. Be in good shape as the giant stride off the pitching deck and attempts to reboard post dive can be really difficult in rough water. No better trip for the money and value/good times! No dedicated facilities or processing. Freshwater rinse tank. Serious photographers used galley for film changes and technical work.

Blackbeard's, *Sea Explorer*, January 2002, Bob Jacon (sbjacon@aol.com) E. Greenbush, NY. Vis: 30-50 ft. Water: 77-78 F. Dives logged: 399. Second trip on Blackbeard's. Capt. Yolanda and Bruce were good. I took too many clothes. Shark feed was good! Dove Bimini area. Corals were generally poor. Amount and variety of fish was good. New tank storage system is a big improvement. Accommodations are still camping on a boat. Great value. The culinary expertise of Wade enhanced the week. His food preparation was good.

Blackbeard's, April 2002, Michael G. Jerome, Beloit, WI. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 77-78 F. Dives logged: 51. Dive restrictions enforced: not to exceed 130 ft. back on boat with 500 psi. Fifteen day dives and three night dives. Shark feeding dive which was run well on Bull Run dive site. Crossing from Miami was very rough. All diving was in the Bimini area. 3000 psi and fills.

***Easy Goin'*, August 2002, Polly Johnson, Pensacola, FL.** Experience:

101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 200 Feet. Water: 83 to 86 F, choppy. MV "Easy Goin". The "Easy Goin" leaves from Ft. Lauderdale. We went to Bimini (customs) and dove south of Bimini, off America and Ocean Cays. Chuck, Peg and JB are dedicated to the divers having a great time. The 65' motor vessel was clean and comfortable. Warm water rinses after every dive and nice cold a/c inside — all areas. The tanks were always 3000+ psi. The food was incredible: lobster, sushi, steak. The diving is some of the best I have ever seen. The reefs and walls are still pristine and covered with fish. We could barely see the coral for all the fish on the reefs. Tiny tropicals to 6 foot reef sharks. Turtles and eels on almost every dive. It is great live aboard package, worth every dollar. As it is a small operation, there is no developing on board. (Ph: 954-524-8717; e-mail paradise@paradisearchters.com; website www.paradisearchters.com)

Gulf Stream Eagle, August 2002, Bill Myers, Pittsburgh, PA. At 4 a.m. Captain Mark Rose made the crossing to Bimini to clear Bahamian Customs. Only seven customers. We dove Victory reef a few times then headed for Cay Sal. There are many Blue Holes, one that has many Caribbean sharpnose and reef sharks. At one I noticed two reef sharks that suddenly swam away very fast. Forty feet below me I saw a 15-ft great hammerhead. Wall diving at Cay Sal is done as drift dives. Coral is healthy with a vertical drop into the deep blue at 80-90 ft.

The crew is good at assisting divers with equipment problems and helping photographers with cameras. Second Capt. Rob McDonald is a great videographer and photographer and shares his knowledge. His video work rivals any on Discovery. Capt. Mark is the fastest diver I have ever seen. Only one person can keep up with him, his son John. It's a genetic thing. If anyone ever (knock on wood) would be in trouble this crew could act fast. They allow total freedom for experienced divers. The cook, Tom is super. I have been on this boat often. The best of the Bahamas. Call 800-488-DIVE and Laurie Rose will take care of everything. They get great rates at local hotels for customers who want to stay an extra night or two. 5 Dives/day is the program. (Ph: 800-488-3483 or 561-575-9800; e-mail gseagle@gulfstreameagle.com; website www.gulfstreameagle.com)

Nekton Pilot, September 2001, Don & Maggi Bradley York, PA. Vis 20' to 100+'. Water temp 80-84 F. Restrictions 130' no deco. Dive with a buddy and the first drink of the day is your last dive of the day. Crew environmentally concerned, gave excellent dive briefings with a large briefing board to show the site. Plenty of fruit juices, hot snacks, freshwater showers and warm towels. Hot tub on top deck. Food was excellent, Arminda provided great meal choices. Crew young but knowledgeable and helpful without being pushy. Excellent fins on ladders and a solid hang bar for your safety stop with a tank hanging close by. Set up your gear,

then forget it. Air fills at your station with under seat storage and top deck storage bin for your between dive items. Spotters on duty while divers are in the water with a skiff on standby for tired divers. Captain Jon and First Mate Nick were in the water on several dives as was most of the crew during the week. Crew carried luggage both on and off the ship to the waiting vans. On arrival day in Ft. Lauderdale the van stops at a liquor store so you can stock up on beer, soft drinks. Large ice chest on deck to put your drinks in. No soft drinks are provided. Cabin size about the same as a regular cruise ship cabin. My nondiving wife enjoyed this trip more than our previous cruise ship vacations. Gulf Stream crossing during heavy rain and heavy seas was smooth. We were in shorts, bathing suits, and barefoot all week. Don't bring much clothing. 5-6 dives per day easy to do. "Dawn Dive" at 5:15 A.M.. Great way to start the day. Steel 95 low pressure tanks. No Nitrox. We had 28 divers but never a crowd on the dive deck. (Ph: 800-899-6753 or 954-463-9324; e-mail info@nektoncruises.com; website www.nektoncruises.com)

Nekton Pilot, May 2002, Lorna Weible, Spring, TX. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 75-79 F. Dives logged: 185. Dive restrictions enforced: 1st alcoholic drink = last dive of the day. The SWATH technology is over rated. In choppy seas this boat definitely rocks and rolls. Did the Bahamas adventure itinerary and was surprised at how much it seemed we were out in

the open ocean. Diving varied from so-so to really good. Capt. moved the boat after a vote of divers because of strong currents. Staff hard working and friendly. Food plentiful and good. Boat was only one half full and it was great. With a full group it would be crowded.

Nekton Pilot, June 2002, Karen, Laguna Beach, CA. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 82 to 88 F, calm. Dive briefs were thorough and accurate. We moved twice per day so you don't all have to run down and suit up at once. Some sites were definitely worth the two or three dives. One site had lots of 6 foot Caribbean reef sharks and we did a shark feed there. I liked the two dives at that site on the day before the shark feed dive better because the sharks just came and checked you out at a slower pace. Saw half a dozen 5-6 foot stingrays on different dives. The trip to Water Cay was great fun. We even jumped off a cliff! Water was plenty warm to forget the wetsuit. Holes were different and in them there was no current. Found out that we could keep up with about a one knot current. Had a drift dive that was running an uncharacteristic three knots. The variety and value made for a most excellent week. This is a great itinerary for intermediate divers (30-100) dives. Photo table up one level from dive deck but overall layout had plenty of space and fresh water rinses. Crew helpful.

Nekton Pilot, August 2002, Stanley N. Kanzaki, New York, NY. Vis: 50-

100 ft. Water: 80-86 F. Dives logged: 500+. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 ft. A real professional operation. All staff DM certified. Diving, housekeeping, meals, well planned and organized. Dive briefing excellent.

Excellent meals. Dive boat clean and well maintained. Every item for divers provided from minor to major items. Divers observed by staff from boat and in depth but left divers alone. Best sites: Theo's wreck and the Hespurus. Saw sharks, rays, turtles, tropicals, coral and sponges. Dolphins did not show as anticipated. At "the strip" shark came toward me but turned away three feet in front of me. Shore visits to Port Lucaya and Bimini disappointing. Great bunch of divers. Capt. Ephey commands an excellent ship and crew.

***Nekton Rorqual*, November**

2001, David R. Lamb

(arceye@scubadiving.com) Salt

Lake City, UT. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100+ Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F. New boat and about half the crew was still green. They tried hard and the service was excellent.

Rorqual's first cruise on their Southern Bahamas itinerary. The boat is based in George Town, Great Exuma and visits Conception Island, San Salvador and Rum Cay. Sharks were abundant around Conception Island as were large fields of garden eels.

Dolphins showed up, no doubt attracted by the scads of razor fish that hovered over the bottom and dived into the sand when you got too close. Most of the diving is on walls that start between 60 and 90 feet. Despite

the snorkel first program advertised in their brochures and assurances when I called, there are no good snorkeling opportunities on this itinerary, which was a disappointment for my wife who doesn't dive. The only shore excursion was a brief visit to San Salvador that amounted to a walk from the dock down a long narrow road to Cockburn Town to see the boarded up museum, a couple small souvenir shops, a little grocery store, a post office and a rather interesting cemetery. The *Rorqual* is the same basic SWATH design as the *Nekton Pilot*. It's stable but can develop a long slow roll or pitch if the seas are right, which made some people a little sick. Thirty-two passengers. The spacious sun deck (which includes a large covered area) lounge and dining areas easily absorb the crowd. All 32 can be seated comfortably in the dining area. The dive deck could get messy if everyone chose to dive at the same time, but they rarely do. After the briefing following breakfast the dive deck is open until lunch, then the boat moves to a new site and the dive deck is open again until around 5:30 p.m. You're free to come and go as you please whenever the dive deck is open and everyone is responsible for maintaining their own surface intervals. If your buddy wants to take a nap when you want to dive one of the staff will happily join you. The night dive is at the afternoon site. During the night the boat moves again to a new site. Slide processing available. **(Ph: 800-899-6753 or 954-463-9324; e-mail info@nektoncruises.com; website www.nektoncruises.com)**

***Nekton Rorqual*, December 2001, Marianne & Jeff Daniel (mbuller@pacbell.net) Walnut Creek, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm no currents. Southern Bahamas itinerary. Excellent operation, as good as on the *Nekton Pilot*. Great, friendly, helpful, knowledgeable crew, safety excellent, mobile dive platform (up and down) is great for easy entries. Warm towels and fresh water rinse after each dive, steel 95 tanks, well-organized and efficient. Food home-style good and plenty of it. Individual rooms with private heads, showers, and A/C controls. This boat has only been in operation for a few months, and had a few minor annoyances that were fixed when you tell them about it. Had a great time. Dedicated camera table and rinse tank, onboard E-6 processing, and a contest for best picture. VCR to play back UW video.

***Nekton Rorqual*, December 2001, Stewart M. Kaslow (smkaslow99@netzero.net) Maplewood, NJ.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy no currents. Charter flight strict on weight limit and charged \$2 per pound over. Cheaper to buy booze in Georgetown than to pay overweight charge. I really like this boat, but it is more convenient and reasonably priced when it leaves from Fort Lauderdale rather than Exuma. Carpeted tables, rinse buckets, compressed air, film processing.

***Nekton Rorqual*, December 2001, Dale Thompson (Dale.L.Thompson@kp.org) Del Mar, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. Reasonable room size, decent quality. Accommodations, food better than I expected. Senior officers on board experienced, rest young and willing. Crew training good for daily operations, but when a diver got in trouble (panic attack) the initial response was like an ant hill kicked over until Captain took charge. Sites were off small islands of South Bahamas, a mix of healthy and pretty poor sites. Due to frontal passage, many were chosen more to provide good lee than perhaps to be the best sites available. Steel 100 tanks, allows you offload some weights. 5 Dives a day easy. Good value.

***Nekton Rorqual*, April 2002, Larry & Janet Gordon (ljgordon@earthlink.net) Tijeras, NM.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 74 to 76 F, choppy. Captain Chris and Paula, his wife, began the trip with a warm welcome and clean and comfortable boat. The crew made us feel like we were in the best possible hands. The trip to San Salvador was choppy but the Captain got us through the rough areas easily. The diving was uneventful. Most dives began at 60' and were similar. Because of the depth, we found the night dives not to our liking. We did see several sharks (one group did see a hammerhead) and a few turtles. A mother dolphin with her baby stayed around for a few hours.

Jordanna caught them on the trip video nursing! John (Wonder) made some great meals, and accommodated my husband's wishes for a special diet. The hot cookies every morning! The group was 18 divers and we got along great. The crew was young, enthusiastic and accommodating. We found the diving good, not great.

Nekton Rorqual, April 2002, John A. Pereira, Lawton, OK. Of the 21 divers on board, 14 were repeat customers. The hotel accommodations in Ft. Lauderdale and flights via Bimini Island Air were arranged by Nekton and were excellent. Upon arrival in Greater Exuma they sent us off to tour Georgetown for four hours when fifteen minutes would due, a waste of time. The *Rorqual* departed for its Conception Island and San Salvador as scheduled. Air 80 to 90 F. Seas were calm and water was 76 to 79F. A polartec vest and suit was perfect. Many divers wore 1.5 to 3mm wet suits. Little current. All diving was wall diving. Walls healthy. Tops showed incursions of algae. Lots of tropical, turtles, rays, and sharks. Saw nurse, silky, black tip reef, and hammerheads. Dove for two days with a bottlenose with a baby. Accommodations were spacious with private heads. Food, as usual, was superb. Crew was helpful and friendly. Captain, mate and engineer are professionals. Tour the engineering compartments — amazing. Although the ads reflect that there is no seasickness aboard the Nekton boats, take a preventive medication just before departure — giving you time to adjust

to the Nekton “waddle.” Overall, a great diving experience and value.

Nekton Rorqual, April 2002, Laura Todd, Arcata, CA. Vis: 40-100 ft. Water: 77-79 F. Dives logged: 155. Dive restrictions enforced: strictly 130', dive your computer. Fun, relaxing week with above average diving at a good price. Southern Bahamas is all wall diving starting at 55 feet down to about 120. \$250 + gorgeous charter flight to Georgetown, Exuma — how many shades of aqua are there? Boat was not completely booked so I lucked out with a cabin to myself at the double occupancy price — standard practice if they can't match you with a roommate. Ground staff were efficient and courteous; advised us they usually sell out six months before each sailing. The rooms are large for a live aboard, although could use more storage space and are showing their age (bubbling wallpaper and lots of rust) even on the newish *Rorqual*. The food was down home and delicious: barbecue with all the trimmings, prime rib, roast pork. They let you know ahead of time about the shortage of fresh fruit and veggies on this itinerary. Both continental and hot breakfast, plenty of lunch variety and snacks in the late afternoon and post night dive plus the much awaited 10 a.m. cookies. Regarding the anti-motion technology, don't throw out that Dramamine yet — this boat moves plenty, just a lot slower. On my last trip we came alongside one of the Blackbeard (monohull) boats in seas of about 2-3 feet and we were rocking gently along while they looked like a

fish flopping on deck. I noticed a definite tendency to porpoise when underway. Cabin-wise avoid #3 due to the noise of the docking chain (its starboard counterpart has the best views), the one next to the galley and both bottom aft ones due to engine room noise. They generally move the boat during lunch and sometime after midnight. Except for our initial crossing (only six hours or so) we had lovely calm conditions at the end of April even with a brisk wind most of the time. Diving is easy from the elevating platform and once everybody figures out not to gear up at once, it's not crowded. Five dives per day, six possible with the occasional dawn dive. The steel tanks get heavy by the end of the week. Warm towels and fresh water showers on the way up post-dive. Briefings are accurate and humorous. I would have appreciated more active guiding because I see more; it was available, but you had to ask, scrounge up some partners, find a staff person. The reefs around San Salvador and Concepcion are pretty well algae coated, but we saw several turtles, lots of grouper and barracuda, two species of sting rays, pretty queen angels, a few eels, octopus, humungous lobsters, a couple reef sharks and two silkies that hung around under the boat for hours. A bottlenose dolphin brought her baby and stayed to two hours two mornings in a row. I saw a 7' scalloped at 55 feet off San Salvador. Pederson and peppermint shrimp, some nudibranchs, cleaning stations, etc. Some cool anchors in snorkeling depths among the staghorn coral on the back

side of San Salvador. The boat is well equipped for photographers with two big rinse tanks on the dive deck, and one dedicated bucket on the salon deck along with a large table with air hose. Slide processing. The salon has a light table and slide making gear. The weekly photo contest is fun. The only shore excursions were self powered kayak adventures through the beautiful shallows. Otherwise, enjoy the exquisite sunsets (complete with green flash) from the hot tub or laze around on the sun deck. "Eat, sleep, dive, repeat." There will be a letter in your room suggesting a tipping amount, which they share equally among the crew. Credit cards OK. The boat's travel agency suggested the Ramada (\$55) in Fort Lauderdale: BIG mistake. From the airport shuttle that never showed to the shabby room to the neighborhood without restaurants to the wake up call that never happened, it was hideous all around. I felt like a princess in a Mediterranean villa at the Hampton Inn (\$95) on the way home. The Best Western is an in-between option.

Nekton Rorqual, May 2002, Rickie Sterne/Chrisanda Button (rickandchris@alltel.net) **Elkins, AR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy surge. The boat is shiny, and everything works. There was an infinite supply of hot water both in our cabin and in the rinse showers by the dive deck. The crew worked hard. Their service was smooth and smiling despite their double watches. Food was home style, tasty, and abundant.

Fresh-baked cookies during midmorning surface interval. Northern Bahamas offered a variety of pleasant diving experiences. There were both a shallow and a deep wreck, patch corals with quite a lot of fish life, and one fantastic “macro” site at Rocky Mountain High, where the showy sponges, sea fans, and tunicates reduced fish to background. We swam with half a dozen reef sharks at Shark Junction and saw over a dozen nurse sharks during the week. We saw many turtles: loggerhead, green sea, and hawksbill, dozens of stingrays at the wreck of the *Hesperus* and fourteen scorpion fish. Divemasters took time to help us get weighted correctly and to offer advice on smoother exits. There is a board for signing on and off the boat, and they also asked us to post our maximum depths. Despite less than perfect weather, we came home happy.

***Nekton Rorqual*, June 2002, Franklin Hall/Carole Ott, Floyd's Knobs, IN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, choppy surge. The crew was great, and the food was good and plentiful. The cabins were the largest we have experienced on any dive boat. Each cabin has windows. Week of rainy, windy weather. The waves at times were 5 feet high, and the surge was considerable. The current was running strong at a couple of locations, requiring hand over hand trips via “Granny” and mooring lines to the reef. The captain and crew did everything they could to find better conditions, but there was no place to

hide. Three divers became ill. The boat will rock and roll if it is rough, don't leave the meds behind. We had 32 divers. The *Rorqual* is large enough that everyone can spread out when not diving. However, though we waited for the initial rush to leave before gearing up, the dive deck was way too small. There is no space between you and the next person. Once, the bungee cords were removed from our tanks and the air turned on. Someone got the wrong tank and didn't bother securing our gear? Another time, my low pressure hose was pinched behind the tank in the cradle next to mine. Divers just weren't watching what they were doing. The wash between the two sections of the boat can really churn up the water near the ladder. We have integrated BCs and were glad to hear that the boat had soft weights. However, the weights are in pre-made pouches designed for weight belts. They are difficult if not impossible to get in integrated BCs.

***Nekton Rorqual*, August 2002, Jill Crocker (crockerjc@aol.com) Austin, TX.** Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. Good setup table with equipment for your cameras. Rinse buckets were available as well. Dive your computers, don't go below 130.

***Sea Fever*, December 2001, Elissa Mayo (ivn6@attbi.com) Corona, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 75 to 81 F, choppy. There are several other dive boats in the area that have similar itineraries, but *Sea Fever* surpassed

my expectations. The *Sea Fever* was about mid priced. An ample dive deck with a spacious camera table and separate gear and camera rinse tanks. New low pressure steel 80 tanks with adapter for DIN configured regulators. Nitrox fills and classes available. Individual gear “stations” in which the diver could sit down to gear up including a large gear bucket underneath the seat, thus keeping the dive deck clear. Giant stride from either side or stern entries were possible. 2 Stern ladders and swim step for getting back onto the boat. Private air-conditioned staterooms with doors, not curtains. The length of the bed was adequate for individuals over 6 ft. tall. 3 electrical outlets in our stateroom for recharging all of our camera batteries. Main room light and reading light above each bed provided adequate illumination. Private sink in our stateroom (note stateroom #1 does not have a sink). Shared head with full sized shower with good water pressure and consistent temperature next to staterooms. Bathroom on dive deck. Fresh water hose on dive deck. Spacious galley facilitated interaction with other divers. TV and videos were available as were fish and reef creature ID books. A spacious top deck with chaise lounges and chairs for laying out. This deck also carried two launchable emergency life rafts and two kayaks. They hoisted a Zodiac chase boat into the water before every dive and was used once to retrieve divers who popped up away from the boat. This boat was also used to deliver passengers to and from Gun Cay during one of our land excursions.

Excellent food including vegetarian meals were prepared for us by Chef extraordinaire Redman prior request. The wheel house was open to passengers. Captains Mike and Allen were especially gracious. Our trip included a \$100 shipboard credit for the \$150 Nitrox class (\$50 expense). Large two tiered camera table on dive deck. Outlets in staterooms were sufficient for charging batteries. (Ph: **800-443-3837 or (757-481-9116; e-mail seafever@seafever.com; website www.seafever.com)**)

Sea Fever, June 2002, Dave Norton (DavePHX@Cox.net) Gilbert, AZ. Experience: 100-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Great crew with flexible itinerary to Cay Sal Bank. If the divers want to move along, we could or if we wanted to stay dive it again or add a night dive, we did. The crew offers a stop at Bimini if the divers choose — we would rather dive, so we all did. It ended up being a shark feeding. Food is plentiful and a variety of American food. Chef “Red” knows how to dish it out. The mechanical systems of the boat worked fine and the crew takes great pride in keeping things running. The cabins 1-3 have a wider bunk on the bottom and a narrower bunk on top. There is only 18" of space between the two, making it difficult to turn over and is claustrophobic. There are no windows in the cabins. Noise from the three large engines permeates the entire cabin area when the boat is making long distance crossings. Only two need to be made on this trip, but one starts about 2 A.M.. With earplugs

and tired people, you can get some sleep during crossings. Otherwise, watch the stars. Other nights are very quiet with just the purr of generators. Great separate multilevel photo table and separate rinse tanks. All camera equipment gently handed to divers and gently taken at the end of the dive and placed in the rinse tank.

Shear Water, August 2001, Debbie Singer, Kalamazoo, MI. Vis: 100+. Water: 84-89 F. First live-aboard so really did not know what to expect. Surprising how comfortable close quarters with 15 others on board a 65' boat can be. The service and efforts made by the staff exceeded all expectations. Their enthusiasm and love of diving, the water and life undersea was shared with all and made this diving experience unique and lifetime experience. Not only was there incredible diving experiences and days of swimming with dolphins and shark diving (they do not bite but like to be petted, sea rays, turtles, healthy beautiful coral and spectacular fish. The food provided and lovingly prepared by our cook, Steve, was fabulous including lobsters and fish the crew and divers speared. Bring twice as much film as you think you will need. Jim's five hours of video of the trip will. (Ph: 888-901-DIVE or 561-691-5808; e-mail info@scuba-adventures.com; website www.scuba-adventures.com)

Shear Water, Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, April 2002, Jim Entry, Twin Falls, ID. Experience: 501-1000 dives Vis: 50 to 150 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, no currents. The trip was

one of the best. Accommodations are comfortable but not luxurious. Comfortable beds, two hot water showers and plenty of dining space. Plenty of space to hang wetsuits and store gear. Nitrox unavailable. Steve, the cook, provided excellent meals and there were snacks and drinks between meals. The crew went lobster hunting and we ate lobster for a several meals. No one lost weight on this trip. The crew was attentive to diver opinions and wishes. The captain found good sites and visibility. Dive profiles were liberal for experienced divers and dive guides were not over attentive. The preplanned sites had excellent visibility and healthy reef life. We dived Mount Olympus, Sugar Wreck and many other sites with great visibility (>120 ft). We saw several eels, rays and turtles and a multitude of tropical fish species at every site. We also did several exploratory dives. I named one site after my wife. We swam with dolphins twice for several hours. Jim Abernethy played with dolphins on a scooter and gave us rides. The dolphins seemed to enjoy the increased speed. The crew put in a box of fish to attract sharks on most dives. We had many opportunities to photograph sharks at 20-30 feet deep. As with dolphins and sharks, I would take photos until I was out of film, surface reload, reenter and shoot another roll. We saw two hammerhead sharks but they were not close. We swam with a pod of pilot whales for an hour. It was a fantastic trip. The Shearwater is a 65' boat, which means the divers may find the boat cramped. Since there were only six guests this

was not a problem. The staff was extremely helpful in all phases of diving. The crew passed the camera to me after entering the water and took it before exiting. They immediately placed cameras into fresh water tanks reserved for UWP gear. The boat had only one small photo table. The staff quickly cleaned the dining tables allowing their use for photographic equipment.

Wind Dancer, June 2002, Peggy Goldberg (pgimages@atlantic.net)
Citra, FL. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80+ Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm choppy currents. The *Wind Dancer*, usually based in Grand Turk, was spending the summer cruising Conception, Rum Cay, and San Salvador. Still learning dive sites but found many the good sites. We expected an air of newness and exploration. The boat is 120', with a 10' draft, a stable boat. Very comfortable — each cabin had its own head and shower. It is the old *Truk Aggressor*. Not enough can be said for the wonderful food Chef Tony prepared, nor for the crew and their willingness to assist you. You must dive at the appointed dive time — so one could not extend their surface interval, say, after lunch, and dive at 3. Since I dive four times a day, instead of five, I usually like to dive mid-afternoon and skip the late 5 p.m. dive, so I can make the night dive. On the *Aggressors*, the dive deck is open when you want to dive. Buffet style meals and wine served. The biggest disappointment and shock was how fast the algae's overtaken the reefs in such

remote areas. This area has some of the best diving in the world — yet most of the reefs were like a moon-scape — covered in green, red, and blue algae. Few hard corals, soft corals and gorgonians were few and dying. Lots of juvenile fish, none of the huge schools of adults we remembered from years past. We did have several wonderful dives with sharks — schools of reef sharks, small turtles, and a mother and baby dolphin that stayed with the boat for several days and teased the divers. The degradation of the reef went as far down as I could see, even when I was at 130'. I only shot nine rolls of film — when I would normally shoot 25-40 rolls. Now we have to fight to save the reefs. Boat had nice, large camera table, and one garbage can be designated just for camera rinses. Strobe charging station in salon. Had problems with E-6 processing during week, so I only had one roll done, and they did not charge me for the ruined roll. (Ph: 800-932-6237 or 305-669-9391; fax 305-669-9475; e-mail dancer@peterhughes.com; website www.peterhughes.com)

Wind Dancer, June 2002, Tripp Jones MD (Tjones@sc.rr.com)
Columbia, SC. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 150 Feet. Water: 76 to 79 F, calm. Inaugural trip for *Wind Dancer* in the Bahamas. The boat was comfortable, cabins were clean and well kept. The food was quite good and in more than adequate portions. Nitrox. The staff was excellent and extremely helpful and attentive. The diving was excellent at San Salvador

with a few hammerheads and more reef sharks. The walls and corals were spectacular with quite good fish life, turtles, and dolphins. The diving at Rum Cay was poor with current and could have skipped this island entirely. We moved after just two dives.

Conception Island was quite good and the crew took us to a tidal river with mangroves for snorkeling. The crew was given less than a week to move from Grand Turk to the Bahamas so they did not have a great knowledge of local sites.

Wind Dancer, August 2002, Beth, NY, NY. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Surge. "Swim with wild dolphins" Bahamas itinerary. air 90's, water 80's, viz 40'-100', current — mild to strong, seven days of sun! All sites were north of Grand Bahama Island, in the Atlantic, on the edge of the white sand shoals where dolphins live. Except the last day's single dive that was close to the island — not so many fish and not great viz. Seems like divers who travel the world poo-poo at Bahamas diving, but I found it excellent. (I have Red Sea, Palau and Caribbean with which to compare this). These sites too far for day boats. Sharks and turtles on most dives. Reefs were teeming with fishes. Some strong current but it didn't bother me. (Some people were annoyed but hey this is the Atlantic and we're scuba diving). You do two morning dives that were never a disappointment (except the last day, because it was close to the island), then spend the afternoon in the tender on the flats looking for dolphins. Of

the five afternoons, only one resulted in personal encounter for twenty mins (of course it was the only day I didn't go out looking for them.). Bring foul weather gear because it gets cold on the tender when you are out there for hours. I did see dolphins twice from the boat. *Wind Dancer* usually does T&C. Captain Brett is a really cool nice guy and runs a great boat and crew. Best food I've had on an American liveaboard. They have a professionally trained chef, Tony, a really nice guy. push for an afternoon dive rather than dolphining. <http://www.peterhughes.com>

BELIZE

Belize Aggressor III, June 2001, Alisse & Denis Ryan, Seattle, WA. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Logged dives: 80. Good: Crew's friendliness and helpfulness. Food was tasty with lots of variety, homemade. Dive platform was organized well. Diving had a variety of fish life. Lots of queen angel fish; saw several spotted eagle rays, turtles and a shark. Health of corals was good (though less than Bonaire). Easy to get 4-5 dives/day including night dives. American Airlines lost luggage. Belize City is a rat hole. It was so windy we could only dive the leeward side of Long Caye. One passenger was obnoxious. Pack light. Rooms are tiny. (Ph: 800-348-2628 or 985-385-2628; fax 985-384-0817; e-mail info@aggressor.com; website www.aggressor.com)

Belize Aggressor, March 2002, Glenn Snyders (snyders21@cox.net) Va Beach, VA. Experience: 251-500