

need for a shuttle from the parking lot was a hassle. Find another place.

St. Thomas Diving Club, Bolongo Bay Beach Club, August 2003, Kenneth Marks (ken@marks.net), Reston, VA. Experience: 101-250 dive. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 F, calm. I first dove St. Thomas in 1980. There were urchins everywhere and the coral was healthy and fish plentiful. Then the urchins started to disappear and the coral declined. On this trip we saw the return of the urchins and the return to health of the reefs. Fish are plentiful again. The addition of dive site moorings is a big plus I'm sure. I was treated to first class service with the St. Thomas diving club in every way you can imagine. In my three days of diving, I visited some really choice sites. The boat was not crowded and the crew tried hard to please everyone. When one of my fin straps broke, they were there with a replacement set of fins. After determining my set up preferences, the crew set up my equipment and changed tanks between dives. Finally, the crew was a really nice group of people that you'd want to spend some time with. On my last day of diving I awoke to a glorious morning and "bathtub" calm seas. Some of the locals skipped work to dive that morning. We set off for French Cap, an offshore pinnacle offering potential for large pelagic fish. I dove a mini-wall with lots of ledges. Fish were plentiful and larger than those closer to the island. There was spectacular stag horn coral growth. The second dive of the day was to an equally choice dive site — Dog Rock. Again, beautiful ledges,

plentiful fish and nice coral growth. I saw many large lobsters on almost all of my dives (14 on one dive alone). I also saw several large rays and at least 2 small black tip sharks. St. Thomas diving is returning to its legendary status. Combining a visit to St. Thomas with a trip to St. Croix for some wall diving would be a stellar combination. There is a high speed boat between the islands, that operates only in high season, that makes diving both islands in one trip easy to do. In St. Croix, I dove with Dive Experience.

(www.st-thomasdivingclub.com,
www.bolongobay.com)

The Wider Caribbean Live-Aboards

THE BAHAMAS

AquaCat, February 2003, Don Paschal (dgpdiver1@aol.com), Orlando, FL. Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 72 to 74 F, calm. Having experienced live-aboards around the world, this crew and accommodations are first class. Found their photo amenities and layout tops for both video and still. On board E-6 processing and a video produced by the crew using clients' footage. This trip will please everyone, hard-core diver to novice. Plenty of side diversions for those who choose to hike, kayak, beachcomb, snorkel, or fish. Met the boat late afternoon of the first day, but did not depart until the next morning. Wish the night dive was done before dinner, so you could enjoy

a glass of wine with the meal. Plenty of camera space on the dive deck. Plenty of room for chargers. E-6 processing onboard. Light table in salon. Crew was accommodating to photographers and the care they exercised with equipment. Cabins had plenty room and electrical outlets for photographers also.
(www.aquacatcruises.com)

AquaCat, March 2003, Anne and Michael Montgomery (dive2live2dive@aol.com), Arnold, MD. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. This boat was designed for divers. Rooms have more storage space than one could ask for, individually controlled a/c, large windows, good reading lights, mini-fridge and decent-sized ensuite shower. Staff professional, approachable, and humorous. Dive deck set up is great. Dedicated spot trip for each diver, choice of tank size (80 or 100), plus Nitrox available. Refilled tanks after dive with you having to remove BCD from tank; refills almost always 3,000 psi and excellent safety system composed of notification board with Dan tags for tracking where each passenger was (On Aquacat, On Sea Dog, In Water). DM Simon great with helping me out with use of new dive computer, and photographers Josh and Sophia always there with advice on shooting tips and camera settings. Briefing before every dive with detailed talk and drawn diagrams. Dive site names and times posted each morning. Five dives per day: two after breakfast, two after lunch and one night dive. If you're a real "dive monkey" you can get 26 dives in during the week. Corals: sea

fans, some staghorn and elkhorn, plate, brain, and black. Fish life: reef sharks, groupers, queen triggers, all varieties of angelfish, basslets, hamlets, parrotfish, bermuda chub, snappers, channel and arrow crabs, scorpionfish, lettuce leaf sea slugs, jaw fish, puffers. At night there were octopuses, schooling silver sides, lobster, shrimp, and morays. Shark feed was a complete thrill! Saw more sharks on this trip than ever, anywhere! They have a boat called *The Biscuit* to fetch diver surfacing far away from the boat. Also have jet boat, *Sea Dog*, with Capt. Howard to take you on daily excursions if willing to miss a dive or two. Well worth it: went hiking, fed iguanas, snorkeled with lemon sharks. Only one dive towel allotted per day so if you need more, bring your own and dry each evening in the wind. Meals great, good variety with a nice green salad always at lunch and dinner. Staff caught a tuna and served us sashimi; Capt. Mark (great guy!) free dived for lobster so we could enjoy lobster alfredo (yummy!). Drinks and snacks on self-serve basis at all hours (Amy's cookies are to die for!). Beer and wine included and hard liquor but your first drink of the day is your last dive of the day: strictly enforced and for good reason. Public area spacious and comfortable; salon has plenty of room for dining plus several roomy couches for watching videos or taking a midday nap. Open feel, lots of natural light. Great UWP books aboard along with Reef ID Set for those of us who have to know "what that was." Photographers and DMs on every dive, follow or not per your preference. Great slide shots

taken of passenger by staff available for purchase at \$5 each, high quality. Trip video shot and edited by Liz is best by far we have ever seen or purchased, especially musical choices for background. If you arrange with AquaCat ahead of time, they provide free airport transfers (take advantage of it because cab fair's a killer). Can't board until 6 p.m. Sat. so good idea to fly in fairly late (boat doesn't depart until about 5 a.m. next morning) or fly in a day early and out a day late to enjoy the island and have a place to crash out of the heat. They do allow you to drop your bags at the boat and even let me take a cool shower on the deck (enclosed). Last night they throw a nice cocktail party with Captain and crew in attendance, and you are responsible for dinner ashore, we recommend East Villa. Marina office always willing to help by calling for cab or reservations, as long as they're open. We definitely intend to return to the AquaCat because of the fantastic customer service, conformable and spacious quarters, and the varied diving. We would choose summer next time to avoid those springtime winds. Great big dedicated camera table on deck. Recharging station and pressurized air hose. Plenty of help in and out of water with cameras. Two camera-only rinse tanks. E6 processing aboard with free mounting, slide film \$10 per. Two large lit tables in salon with magnifiers for slide viewing. Slide show and contest at trip end with nice prizes.

AquaCat, April 2003, Linda Bellofatto, Ridgefield, CT.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to

80 feet. Water: 78 to 83 F, choppy. Largest (for a live-aboard) rooms that we've seen, with plenty of cabinet space and full-length closet. Showers in bathroom not the greatest idea — no stalls — just a curtain and water gets all over the floor. However, there are shower stalls on the dive deck, and you'll tend to use those most of the time. You shower off right after your dive and use the showers also to rinse your gear while you're in there. Terrific cook, friendly, extremely competent crew. Nice shore excursions as well. Bring binoculars. We saw pilot whales the first day. They stuck around the boat, and many were able to jump in and snorkel with them. They do a shark dive with a "chumsicle." Nitrox is available but at additional charge to trip fee. Vis was mostly less than 100 feet, but that may be time of year. Certainly clear enough to see lots of good stuff. One of the owners of the boat was on board that week and said that something killed off sea urchins, so there is a lot of algae on the reefs — but this is not limited just to this area but is all over the Bahamas. He has been involved in monitoring coral reefs. The Marine Conservancy and NOAA sponsor this program called RECON. The crew also does REEF studies throughout the year. Bottom line — even though the fish life is good, it is not as good as some other places. Good trip for a nondiver (who at least snorkels) paired with a diver, because there is plenty for the nondiver to do, and both can snorkel together. You will still see plenty of fish with sharks guaranteed on the shark dive (and we saw some at other times as well). Even though this is a catamaran, it is not a

swath like the Nekton boats. If you are even slightly prone to seasickness, bring remedies. We hit a storm, and it got pretty rough. Even those who normally don't get sick weren't feeling good that day. So be prepared.

AquaCat, April 2003, Phil (philto-bin6625@yahoo.com), Portland, OR. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, calm.

Great first experience on a live-aboard. Ron the captain was great in welcoming everyone, and most of the staff were helpful and friendly. Jim the cook did an outstanding job of serving good healthy delicious food, with plenty of salads, meat, fish, and great deserts. The rooms were spacious enough. We had both a twin and single bed, with a private bathroom. The condition of the room was good, with fresh towels every other day. Breakfast was at 8:00 a.m. every day, and our dive briefing was at 9:00 a.m. with our first dive at 9:30. Second dive was at 11:00, lunch was at 12:30. Another dive at 2:30 p.m. and another at 4:30 with a night dive at 8:00 p.m. The briefings were short but well done. Wall dives, drift dives, reef dives, and plenty of opportunity to go deep if you wanted. My wife and I had about 30 dives each when we arrived, and we had the least experience on board. Should have been more than one DM in the water with a group of 20 divers. Dry table for cameras and good rinse tanks, good help getting in and out with camera gear.

AquaCat, May 2003, Don Wilson, Lorton, VA. Dives logged: +300. Vis: 50 to 60 feet. Water: 81 to 84 F. Dive

restrictions enforced: recreational limits. Despite the wonderful, competent crew and exceptional accommodations, this is not a trip for experienced divers. In short there is little to see. The reefs are in terrible shape and the operation resorts to drift dives and shark feeds to keep you interested. The diving is dictated by the tides, and the ship's inability to navigate rough seas. Better trip for the novice, beginner diver.

AquaCat, May 2003, Gerald Canning, Reno, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 200 feet. Water: 78 to 83 F, calm. This was a first class dive boat. Rooms were spacious, either two twin beds or a king sized bed, bathroom and shower, large closets, and a mini-refrigerator. The dive deck was well laid out with plenty of room. 32-33% Nitrox for an added package price of \$100 for the week (26 to 27 dives are possible). Tanks were available as 100, 80, 63, or 50 cubic feet — your choice, and you could dive until you exhausted your tank! There were fresh water shower stalls on the dive deck — four or five showers a day were common, with three freshwater makers, running out was not a problem. The main deck was well laid out. The lounge area was big enough to accommodate the dining area and a separate seating area with couches, TV, DVD, and VHS equipment. Chief Jim was awesome. We can hardly wait for his cookbook to be published. The captain and crew were hard working, friendly, and truly working to make this a great dive experience. I had difficulty with my regulator, and they lent me bits and pieces so that I could make it through

the week. All diving was done from the *Aqua Cat* — though we had a shore boat that could carry about 25 and a safety craft in the water at all times. It's an impressive site to do a drift dive from a 105-foot cat, at night, and have the captain nimble enough to pick us up with no additional effort on our part. Safety was key — during the dives there was always a divemaster on the front of the boat, two on the rear deck and one in the water. We had some great wall dives, a terrific shark feeding dive, and some shallow dives. We saw Southern rays, yellow rays, spotted eagle rays, Caribbean reef sharks, silky sharks, large lobster, and all of the usual reef fish though a relative scarcity. We all saw at least one of everything you would expect to see — but we didn't see the big quantities of fish I expect to see — particularly since we were diving in a marine park. Greatly enjoyed the trip — but I doubt that I will go back. There was a dedicated table for cameras with a dry air hose set up for drying camera equipment before putting it back on the camera table. Divemasters would hand you your camera in the water and take it back and put it in a dedicated rinse tank as you exited the water. There was a dry charging area with a lot of outlets — with about ten cameras aboard, there was never a problem getting a 110v outlet.

***AquaCat*, May 2003, Reed Nescher (reed@nescher.com), Beaumont, CA.** Dive logged 3500+. Sunny and dry. Calm and flat. Vis: 60-120 + ft. Water: 78-81 F. Skin or 3mil spring suit. Currents: Where they belonged, a couple of drift dives. Dive your own

profile on no drift dives. 130 ft limit enforced. Went with Wiley's Scuba Locker Group of twenty-two. You can use the pool and hang at the bar at Hurricane Harbor until going aboard the "*Cat*" at 6:00 pm for dinner and orientation. You will get your dive deck and boat briefing as you unpack your dive gear and set up your tank for the one time in the week. You can choose between 63QFT, 80QFT, OR 100QFT aluminum tanks. The fills were at 3000 psi+ and nitrox was available for an extra charge. Once you have settled in to your large stateroom you can go up to the salon for dinner. The boat gets going early in the morning to your first dive site. The crew works their butts off for you taking you diving, shore excursions, and just taking care of you. This is luxury diving at its best. The reefs are not the best in the world, although some are great. Most are overgrown with algae from years of overfishing. A healthy reef needs parrotfish to eat algae and help keep the reef healthy. There is a lack of large fish of any kind except sharks. This boat has the best shark dive anywhere at any depth. It is handled well by the crew and there is no hand feeding. This one will get your heart beating. I took some of the best shark video I have ever gotten. One big gray hit my camera while it was rolling, a real jack-the-knife deal, it got everyone's attention. It turned out to be a one hour nineteen minute shark dive. It does not get much better! The week flew by as the twenty-two of us had a great time with each other and Captain Ron and his crew of nine. Even with thirty people aboard, this 102 ft by 36 ft three deck ship, you

did not feel crowded at all and could find place to yourself. It was a well-run operation. The only thing they need is a parasail for the “Sea Dog” for fun during those rare non dive times. I did twenty-four dives in five and a half days and took a couple dives off. Out of twenty-four dives if you keep your eyes open you will see some great stuff its just not everywhere like Belize. It is Bahamas diving after all.

AquaCat, August 2003, Allison Ashnault (xtremefun@pacificnet.net), Northridge, CA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, calm. Exceptional boat with a fabulous crew! The boat is a 3-year-old, 100+ foot catamaran with 11 spacious cabins (max of 22 passengers) and 11 crew members. Passengers are fed 3 meals a day — great food — with care given to special requests and dietary concerns of the passengers) plus snacks, with beer and sodas on tap and wine at dinner. (Once you drink you are done diving for the day). Don't over pack. You have plenty of room for your stuff but you won't need much! All you need are shorts, T-shirts and swimsuits! I had shoes (Teva sandals) on for maybe a total of 3 hours over the 7 days and that was just when we went on land tours. The water was clear and warm with an abundance of critters. A couple of days we got slight swells and surge, but overall it was easy going. Wall dives, shallow reef dives, shark dive (10-15 reef sharks — but we saw sharks on almost every dive we did), drift dives, night dives, and a blue hole! Aqua Cat did a good job of letting you know in advance

what to expect and what you should bring on your trip. Bring your favorite DVD or video. Movies were played nightly in the lounge and it was nice to have a selection of movies. The boat has all the standard safety equipment and the crew explains all the rules of the boat in an in-depth safety briefing. Safety and the comfort of passengers was always addressed by the crew members. Designated rinse tank for cameras only, designated dry areas for cameras, air hoses to dry off camera equipment, recharging stations, and slide processing on board. There was also a photo/video competition offered — grand prize was a free return trip!

AquaCat, August 2003, Bill Shepherd (Chorsejbs@aol.com), Satellite Beach, FL. Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 87 to 89 F, choppy. New boat, well maintained and clean with spacious accommodations. Crew well qualified, committed to customer service, and stressed safety. Excellent chef (Jim) who livened up meals with his banter on just about everything. Meals were well prepared, offered great variety, and ample servings. Excellent wall dive sites usually populated by a variety of large and small life. Coral in good condition. Installed mooring buoys helped to preserve the anchorage sites. Shark feed dive captured the attention and interest of all. Shallow dives disappointing with little life and drab surroundings. Staff let you dive your own profile and respected the abilities of experienced divers. Excellent value. Dive deck camera accommodations limited. Good rinse

facilities and crew handled camera both entering and exiting water.

***AquaCat*, September 2003, Ron Johnson (GrtDay@msn.com), Katy, TX.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 110 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Hurricane Fabian passed us right by and we had calm waters. These reefs, like most in the world, were suffering from coral decline, but some of the healthiest that I had seen. Fish life was everywhere. Lots of groupers, angelfish, and sharks. We did some 130 foot dives on incredible pristine walls. We also did many dives in 20-35 feet and they were spectacular. The coral landscapes were most impressive as were the caves, cuts, channels, and holes. Water temp was always 82 plus! Because of the plentiful sea life, it replaced Cayman's Bloody Bay Wall as my reference dive area and I've been to many of them. The *AquaCat* has raised the bar for live-aboard diving (at www.aquacatcruises.com). The 102 foot *AquaCat* is huge! The main salon is roomy and comfortable. There are 7 large sofas that are perfect for watching movies or reading. There are large coffee tables that double as permanent slide tables. The cooking is the best that we've ever had! There is always enough for many seconds! The cook has a huge galley to work in and he maximizes it every meal. Room that was 14 x 12. It was equipped with twin beds but the vanity dresser could easily have been moved to make a king. They echoed that design that in many their rooms. The head was big enough to fit 4-5 of your closest friends. The storage was cavernous

and each room had a refrigerator. Unfortunately there was not a DVD/TV in each room. Each room had 2 large water level windows. The dive deck was large enough for the 22 passengers. There were 2 enclosed showers on the deck. The camera table was usually adequate but there were 14 cameras this week. Most of them were film — but a couple of us had evolved to digital! The *AquaCat* even had an LCD projector with which I connected my notebook computer and presented a slide show of my digital photos. No compressed air to blow off the cameras at the table. The *AquaCat* also has 100 cubic foot tanks available at no charge. Nitrox was the standard 32% mix but they usually filled to 2800-3000 psi. Photo pros shot bunches of slides for the Thursday eve slide shows. Curiously they wanted to charge us for the slides they shot. The AC went out at 2-4 am on 3 nights. I found myself sleeping on the top deck a few times and that truly sucked. The *AquaCat* was built in Australia using French air conditioners. Fantastic crew of 9. The Captain made a helluva Pina Colada while the video pro did one of the best video's we've even seen! He was a little out there, but most creative people are. The Divemaster and his beautiful Dive-Mistress were always there and able to assist. See the sharks on the tail of Dive-Mistress Michelle was an interesting site. PS: Beth Olivera of *AquaCat* Cruises sent me a \$200 trip voucher as retribution for my discomfort. Upon checking with my fellow passengers, she sent everyone the same discount voucher. A very responsible thing to do, I believe!

Blackbeard's Cruises, Morning Star, October 2002, William Ungerman (elitecorps@aol.com) Santa Ana, CA.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 110 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. As often mentioned by other *Undercurrent* commentators, it is like camping at sea.

There is little or no privacy. The bunks are separated by a curtain and no one makes up the bed and leaves a rose on your pillow with a breath mint. Well, at least you don't have to "hot bunk." I was in the Marines, so I can live with it. With a full complement of 24 guests, it's crowded, but the crew handled it well. There are no secrets kept here nor available retreats. It's like one big family picnic. The diving offered was as good as anything I've experienced in the tropical Atlantic or Caribbean. Although the reefs were typically shrouded in a lot of algae, they were otherwise in great shape.

Plus, Captain Jay spared no expense in seeing to it that his divers saw the best sites, weather permitting. We dove around Bimini and then trekked to the Gingerbread Grounds and on into and around Grand Bahama. Who else burns that much fuel? (They motored, using the sails only for stabilization.) Best of all, we never sat on a site for three dives — not even two, except by request. Eighteen dives offered and sixteen sites visited. The crossing over from Miami to Bimini was a little rough (The Gulf Stream). Late overnight in Bimini and a half day and overnight in port at Port Lucaya on Grand Bahama. Freeport is so crime ridden, it is declared unsafe. There were 18 dives offered during the five

days of diving, including drift, wreck, wall, reef, night, and twilight adventures. Bring towels and clothespins and plenty of SPF 30. A windbreaker is a good idea also. Dramamine is a definite must for most. An unknown flu-like bug or other phenomenon hit both cast and crew and laid all but three or four low. Get to the weights early, as they ran out. I was unable to dive my 3-mm suit because there weren't any more weights. So it was polartec and a 1-mm. *Blackbeard Cruises* has a great home office ("Beth"), and the *Morning Star* (at least) had an accommodating, hard working crew. If you don't mind a bare-bones platform and living accommodation, you cannot beat the price. Economy-minded, hardcore divers, this is your home.

(www.blackbeard-cruises.com)

Blackbeard's Cruises, December 2002, Raj Popli (rpopli@attbi.com), Pleasanton, CA.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, choppy. Enthusiastic crew, have knowledge of the dive sites, and one advantage of camping-style living arrangement is camaraderie, which develops among the divers quickly. Very small boat, with the result of no place to lounge around after the dives, unless you like sitting on a hard bench above dive gear bins in the sun. Will do mostly three dives a day (couple of days with four dives a day during the whole trip). On a per dive basis, it is definitely not half the cost of other live-aboards, as *Blackbeard* advertises. In fact, it is about the same cost. Since middle bunks share the same space as kitchen area, you will be the first to

know what is cooking for breakfast. I am sure if chef had more elbow room, he could have done a better job of cooking. He had a small (maybe 2 x 3 feet) patch to work in. One camera rinsing container; we were told water would not be changed during the trip. No camera table except lunch table.

Blackbeard's Cruises, Pirates Lady, January 2003, Charles Seder (edandbunny@hotmail.com), Mesa, AZ. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 68 to 79 F, choppy. These boats are not for anyone who has the slightest problem with seasickness or aspiration pneumonia. The time of year we went may have contributed to the problem. Seas did get rough. One day dives were canceled due to unsafe conditions entering and exiting water. Fortunately we had a cabin to ourselves that had excellent A/C so we were able to suffer in privacy. The dives we did were all excellent. The fish were plentiful and varied. Sharks were on dives other than the shark feed. Crew failed to check up on us while we were ill. We could have been dead in the cabin and they would not have known. After a diver error DCS hit on the other boat, our divemaster became over cautious. He would not allow us to repeat a wall starting at 115 ft because divers had been drinking the night before. I do not drink, but I know that everyone was having fun but were not intoxicated. The divemaster for the other boat was seen staggering drunk to the point of almost falling off the dock. To punish us for the actions of a diver on the other boat was not right. Blackbeards is a great value with

superb diving for those who don't mind camping on a boat.

Blackbeard's Cruises, Pirates Lady, May 2003, Reed Nescher (reed@nescher.com), Beaumont, CA. Vis: 60-120+ ft. Water: 78-81 F. Dives logged 3500+. Sunny and dry. Calm and flat, small swell light winds, skin or 3 mil spring suit. Currents: where they belonged, a couple of drift dives. Dive your own profile on none drift dives. 130 ft limit enforced. Went with Wiley's Scuba Locker Group of seventeen. This is big kids camp on the water. Lots of fun, possible 18 dives, on a sixty-five foot motor sail boat, with rack bunking in three cabins. This is a little tough compared to other live-aboards, but worth the hassle if you make it fun. The only negative is the heads, they suck if everything is going well. Small cramped and bar stool. High! Could ruin the trip for you. The free booze can help make it up. Beer and rum punch flow after diving when you want it. I did have to teach the crew how to make a good rum punch, but now I think they got it. In Bimini the other two boats drank all of ours and throw out theirs. The crew works hard for you sailing the boat, filling tanks, cleaning, cooking, and diving. Shore excursions happen at Port Lucia and Bimini. This is fun and gives everyone a chance to get a real shower and a chair to sit in. The Jacuzzi at the yacht club was great as well as the pool. The bars were a blast and the dancing was great. A lot of opportunities to change the routine of other boats and cut loose at camp with a little fun above the surface. The reefs are not the

best, although some are in good shape, most have become over grown with algae from years of over fishing. A healthy reef needs parrotfish to eat algae and help keep the reef healthy. There is a lack of large fish of any kind except sharks. I shot some of the best hawks bill turtle footage ever shot. You get to dive a number of wrecks and see lots of turtles and sharks. This boat has a good shark dive that is handled well by the crew and there is no hand feeding. This one will get your heart beating. In the sand the visibility gets real bad from sharks and people kicking up the bottom. It would be better if the action were on top of a reef instead of a sandy bottom — I think. We dived the Bimini barge in a ripping current and spent some surface time on a beautiful beach before our next dive. We had the opportunity to spend some time on a couple of beautiful keys. Weather permitting the captain puts you on the best sights available. I did fourteen dives in five days on an easy pace. A couple of dives were hard work in the current and they make it clear they do not like chasing you down in the dinky. It seems to me that the Bahamas area will come back in a few years, but it still needs protection and care. It was fun and at a low price. You do pay a price in comfort and privacy, but depending on your level of comfort it has the potential for a world class blast.

Easy Goin', March 2003, Paul Osmond (marriard@deepseaimages.com), Weston, FL. Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 120 to 240 feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. The *Easy Goin'* is a converted crew boat from

Louisiana that once ran workers to oil rigs on bus-like seating — basically a pilot house and seating areas. The owners (Chuck and Peg) live on the boat year round and have turned this into a home. The kitchen/galley is behind the pilot house where Peg seemed to be 24 hours a day, sending barrel loads of extremely tasty food and snacks at the five of us. We wondered where the other ten people on board where that she was trying to feed. We often had third helpings and barely put a dent in the supply of food offered. No leftovers either — Peg won't have it even we asked. The lounge/dining area, with seating for everyone and a large table where meals were served, I used as a camera table between dives. It includes satellite TV, an icemaker, the bar, and a VCR with a large quantity of videos to choose from. Out from the dining area is the dive deck, where there was room for the two tanks each, a dive gear storage area, a hanger for your wetsuits, a fresh water hose and a compressor for fills. Paradise is putting Nitrox on board shortly, but we brought our own O2 tanks to allow us to do our own mixing. The living quarters have several double bunk bed style cabins, which are comfortable and with plenty of storage even for a camera equipment junkie. There is only one head on board, but this is in a true bathroom with a shower and sink. This wasn't an inconvenience with the number of people on board. The boat has storage capacity for 200 gallons of water, and can make several more gallons of water per hour so there are no real water restrictions. When we motored by the *Blackbeard's* boat (30 seconds

of fresh water/day/person, I believe), we had a blast washing our gear, having a water fight, having a shower, and washing the side of their boat. They looked amused! Sorry, that was we looked amused. Captain Chuck, First Mate/Cook Peg and Divemaster JB were wonderful and happily interacted and dived with us the whole trip. Many an hour was spent talking to Chuck in the pilot house as we motored around Bimini and the nearby islands. They ensured we had a great time, even though we are a free wheeling and loud bunch. Adapting to us was no effort at all. The reef walls in Bimini were amazing and reminded me very much of Cozumel with similar currents and formations. The visibility was always over 100 feet — often closer to 200 feet. Amazing amount of black coral. Quite a few reef sharks and hawksbill turtles around as well. The wreck of the Sapona is a must — in only 20 feet of water. It is home to all the little creatures — including nudibranchs and a huge population of urchins. If you book the boat, it will basically take you where you want and make this the best live-aboard experience of your life. I have been on many live-aboards, and this surpassed absolutely all of them. Best of all, you leave right out of Ft. Lauderdale! (www.paradisecharters.com/welcome.htm)

***Easy Goin'*, May 2003, Robyn Churchill** (reefgazer@aol.com), **Hollywood, FL.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 150 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, currents. First-rate dive operation. The three-member crew of

the *Easy Goin'* is beyond wonderful. Captain Chuck is a friendly person with a great sense of humor. He's safety-conscious, and his boat is very well maintained. He conducts a thorough safety briefing before departing from the marina and points out the safety equipment. He welcomes you to hang out in the pilot house with him whenever you'd like, just to shoot the breeze. He's so likable that you'll feel compelled to laugh at all his corny jokes! First mate Peg is a caring person who goes out of her way to make sure her guests are having a good time. The divemaster/instructor JB has a charm all his own. He's a wealth of knowledge about the marine life and dive sites in the area. He's always more than willing lend assistance when asked, and he gives thorough briefings before each dive. He guides most of the dives and always points out really cool things to look at. He's safety-minded, but you never feel "smothered" by needless rules and restrictions on your diving. A 62-foot vessel, *Easy Goin'* is spotlessly clean and comfortable. The boat leaves out of the Bahia Mar marina in Ft. Lauderdale. Trips are limited to six to seven guests with personalized attention for each guest. Besides spectacular diving, there are other activities such as fishing, snorkeling, and kayaking with their onboard ocean kayak. They do weekend trips to Bimini and week-long trips to the west end, Grand Bahamas. There are upper and lower berths in each cabin, with storage room at the end of each berth and under the lower berth. Two of the three guest cabins have full-size lower berths for couples. Besides the guest head, there's a warm-

water shower on the dive platform. The boat has an entertainment salon with satellite TV/VCR, stereo, and reading materials. There's also a sun deck with chairs and lounge chairs for relaxation between dives. First mate Peg serves up three wonderfully delicious meals each day, with great appetizers before dinner and snacks in between each dive. She cooks enough for a small army and tries to accommodate individual tastes and any dietary restrictions. On past trips we've been treated to delicacies such as grilled steak, lobster, swordfish, shrimp Creole, homemade conch fritters, and fresh-baked breads and desserts. There's also complimentary beer, wine, and Captain's rum punch for after the last dive of the day. The vis was excellent, 70 to 150 feet, and the water was warm, 82 to 84 degrees in May. The dive sites in Bimini were pristine and teeming with marine life. There's a great abundance of tropicals and lots of colorful soft corals. Turtles and rays are numerous in Bimini, and on one dive in particular we had encounters with three to four nurse sharks, six Caribbean reef sharks, and several large grouper. Wall diving, wreck diving, and night diving are all included — the Sapona Wreck is not to be missed! We did a night dive there and saw several huge lobster, a variety of crabs (both large and small), turtles, rays, and several motionless tropicals that were encased in their nighttime "cocoon." We could get very close for photos. We also came across a small school of approachable squid, and their iridescent blue color set against the nighttime blackness of the water was unbelievable! www.paradisearcharters

.com. Fresh water camera-only rinse tank, work/storage shelves, and personal "storage box" underneath your tanks.

Fascination, Carnival Cruise Ship, March 2003, Walter Dudley, Phoenix, AZ. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, calm. This was a 95-foot wreck dive followed by a 35-foot wreck dive. The large freighter had begun accumulating encrustation and attracted numerous small fish. The dive operator did check our certification but was not concerned about our dive history. The dive operator is affiliated with the cruise ships and picked up six from the Carnival cruise ship and five more from other cruise ships. The captain, Alan or Andrew, divided us into two groups and away we went. The first dive site was about 25 minutes out. At that location the fish life was not too exciting, and there was little coral. Most of our underwater time was spent inspecting the shipwreck and going in and out of some of its passageways. Our dive master, Jovan, did check with us often to see that we were okay and asked for our remaining air pressure once. At the end he directed us to go back up the anchor line. It seems that everyone chose to do the 15-foot safety stop before surfacing. Before leaving the dive site the captain took roll call. The boat, *Strike III*, was spartan, yet clean, and provided us with complimentary water and punch. The dive equipment provided by the dive company was adequate. The second dive spot was about 10 minutes from the first and was at the site of another wreck. This time a much smaller ship

had apparently made a beeline for the Nassau lighthouse. Unfortunately the ship ran aground and sunk about 100 feet from the lighthouse. On this dive we once again divided into the same two groups. One group headed for the artificial breakwater cement blocks and the other for the wrecked ship. This ship was a more recent wreck and the encrustation was not as developed. There were a number of fish — yellow tails, parrot, tang, and the usual assortment of Caribbean fishes. I did not see any turtles nor eels. I did see a rather large grouper (appropriate as I think of the term Nassau grouper) and someone else saw a large ray. After poking about the wreck our group swapped locations with the other group. We then investigated the cement breakwater barriers. There were many fish, and some coral was attaching to some barriers. We followed the divemaster by swimming in and out of the barriers before finishing this 35-foot deep dive. However, the crew did not set out spare tanks for a safety stop as they had done at the first dive. Our return trip to shore was about 15 minutes and again the captain took roll call before we left the dive location. This is the first time I had been on a cruise ship and my expectations about cruise ship-arranged scuba diving were not too high as I thought it may be a rather canned operation. That being the case I found the dive to be better than expected but clearly not at the level I have experienced on the *Belize Aggressor* or better land-based operations such as found on Tortola. I did take an afternoon tour with one of the local taxi drivers (Mr. Peepei) and found it a good, not cheap, value. He

had been on Nassau for years and obviously took pride in his country and sharing it with we tourists. The tour included many of the government buildings, a plethora of banks (Nassau is a bank-secrecy haven, although the IRS is working hard to remove the secrecy), upper scale and poorer neighborhoods, the extravagant Atlantis resort complex. The huge Atlantis aquarium was outstanding. Manta rays, grouper, sharks, and others were superb. I have been to many aquariums — Boston, Chicago, Curacao, San Diego, and so on — and this Atlantis exhibit is as good or better than any others. Mr. Peepei cautioned me about going out alone at night. Of course that is the case in most large cities. (www.carnival.com/Ships)

***Nekton Pilot*, May 2003, Francine Alexander (goldenvoice@dc.rr.com), Cathedral City, CA.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm, currents. The crew made this trip outstanding. The service I received as a temporarily disabled diver was fantastic. The diving was good to very good, with the highlight being the large size and diversity of the tropical fish. We did encounter a few Caribbean, black tip, and nurse sharks. The steel 95 tanks made the dives longer and our weight pouches 6 lbs lighter — nice. The *Nekton Pilot* is not as deluxe as a *Dancer* or *Aggressor* vessel, but the crew were more willing to please. Their service more than made up for slightly worn out surroundings. The food was great, and Erminda cooked the special dietary foods we brought on board. There were great

cookies at 10:30 a.m. every day. We heartily recommend this crew and itinerary. (www.nektoncruises.com/Pilot/Pilot.aspx)

Nekton Pilot, June 2003, Richard Kendall (rkendall623@earthlink.net), Peoria, AZ. Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 85 feet. Water: 85 F, calm, currents. The diving was great, and a school of 20 to 30 dolphins swam with us for nearly an hour. They rubbed up against several snorkelers. The reefs — especially Rocky Mountain High — were outstanding. There were many turtles in several places, and many reef sharks that were curious but not aggressive at Shark Junction. The food was great and plentiful. The crew were helpful. In spite of spotty weather and a few dives with strong currents, the diving was everything you could ask for. On the negative side, a lot of condensation caused the carpet in our room to be wet the entire week. While E-6 processing was promised, and that was the main reason for this return trip, all film from our first three dives were ruined by the processor. They claimed it was the machine, but we suspect carelessness. Accordingly, we would not allow any further attempts to process our film. This put a huge crimp in our ability to see results and adjust as needed. For the rest of the trip, only one roll by another diver was processed. It also eliminated the Friday night slide show, usually a big deal on *Nekton*. Since the processing on board was one of the main reasons we returned to *Nekton* for our second trip, it is doubtful that we will return

again. We would pick another live-aboard with good processing.

Nekton Rorqual, August 2002, Vance Verbeck, Bay City, TX. Vis: 50-100 ft. Water: 79-82 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130-foot depth. The most comfortable boat I've been on. Wonderful accommodations. Excellent staff. Easy entry and exit. Divemasters available if requested, otherwise you dive your own dive. The food was very good, and plentiful. We will dive again with Nekton Cruises. Wide variety of dive sites — deep and shallow wrecks and reefs. At a shallow wreck, huge loggerheads come in at night for shelter. Awesome! Favorite dive site was Mt. Olympus. Most entertaining dive was with a remora that looked like he wanted to be my friend. (www.nektoncruises.com/Rorqual/Rorqual.aspx)

Nekton Rorqual, October 2002, Julian Watkins & Debbie DiMascio (julianw@flash.net), Los Angeles, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm, choppy, surge, no currents. Very stable boat. Our second trip; first trip was two years ago on the *Pilot*. Nearly identical boat, accommodates 32 divers. Speed is a little faster than *Pilot* and some other improvements to air conditioning, pipes keep water from dripping in the cabins (a problem on the *Pilot*). Hydraulic dive deck lowers into position when in use. Deck is roomy with ample storage for personal dive gear. Tanks are steel 95s and remained hooked up with your BCD and reg. for entire trip. Nitrox not available. Fresh

water rinse tanks available for gear and hot showers for post-dive rinse off. Staterooms are reasonably spacious with good storage shelves and ample space under the bed. Good A/C controls and good-sized private bathroom with toilet and shower. Sink is in the cabin area outside of bathroom. Rooms may have a foul, musty odor, helps to leave A/C on and ask crew to spray with deodorant if necessary. Damp-rid bags are placed in each room customarily to help reduce mildew. Very spacious salon area for dining and lounging. Good selection of videos, books, magazines, and games. Usually two TVs and video players. All meals are tasty and well-prepared. Cook will try to meet special dietary needs. Fresh-baked, hot-out-of-the-oven cookies served around 10:30 a.m. No alcohol or carbonated beverages served, bring your own. Beverages provided are lemonade, Gatorade, iced tea, juices, coffee, tea, etc. First dive briefing held each morning at 8:00a.m. up on the spacious sundeck (top level). Good details on each dive site, including current, visibility, critters, reef layout, and more. Lots of storage for dry items on sundeck plus hangers to quickly wind-dry your wetsuit or dive skin. Two morning dives at the first site; boat is moved during lunch to second dive site for two afternoon dives, followed with a night dive after dinner. Many outstanding dive sites to enjoy on the Bahamas Adventure itinerary. Our favorites were Scoto Reef (prolific fish life and we swam with a pod of wild Atlantic spotted dolphins here!!), Sugar Wreck (best night dive), Theo's Wreck (best wreck), Shark Junction (what

else, best shark sightings), Wreck of the Hesperus (best huge loggerhead turtles seen on night dive), The Strip (best fish behavior viewing and abundance of life), Victory Reef (excellent swim-throughs). Crew was new, but attended to our needs. Crew members join you on dives if you need a buddy. All crew members are dive instructors. All seemed to be knowledgeable about diving and safety standards. Dedicated camera table and rinse tanks, on board E-6 processing, light tables, photo contest at end of week with digital images now permitted (Sept. 02).

Nekton Rorqual, December 2002, Jim Virgil (jvirgil@IMBRIS.com), Coeur d'Alene, ID. Dives logged: 500+. Vis: 80 to 120 feet. Water: 79 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 feet. This was our fourth trip to the southern Bahamas on the Nekton boats. Diving is on par with Little Cayman. The *Nekton's* service and food were excellent and as there were only five divers (12 crew) we felt that we had our own yacht. We had a couple of dolphins who played with us for at least 10 min. We saw reef and hammer head sharks. Good turtles. Large grouper and great tropicals. Spectacular diving with good visibility. The dives are relatively deep, so we pushed our nitrogen limit all week because we didn't want to short cut any dive. Getting to Georgetown, Exuma, with Bimini Air will cost you more than you expect, because they charge you \$2.00 per pound over 50 lbs.

Nekton Rorqual, January 2003, Jeff Griest, Kennett Square, PA. Dives logged: 279. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water:

78 to 79 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 feet. Smooth and safe running ship and dive operation, relaxed and informal. Captain adamant regarding 130 feet depth limitations, no molesting sea critters, and no diving after consuming alcohol. Steel 92s filled to 2,500 psi plus. Dive own profile. Divemasters helpful and available if you needed a buddy. Usually five dives per day; usually twice at same site plus nite dive at same site. Dive deck somewhat small/cramped, but you could stagger your entrance, so this was no problem. Crewman always on lookout when divers were in water. Food ample and quite good but not outstanding. Alcoholic beverages are B.Y.O. and are available in Georgetown, Exuma, before departure. Charter flight from Ft. Lauderdale charges extra for weight over 60 lbs. Don't bring many clothes except swimwear.

***Nekton Rorqual*, March 2003, Bob & Carolyn Smith (ruby07_17@hotmail.com), Swansea, MA.**

Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 76 to 79 F, calm, choppy, surge. This was our first live-aboard. Everyone associated with *Nekton*, including office personnel, worked hard to make this a quality experience. The *Rorqual* crew were safety- and environmentally-conscious and paid attention to their guests' needs and desires. They all work well as a team and appear to enjoy their jobs. The cabins were roomy, the beds comfortable, with plenty of hot water for showers. The entire boat was immaculate, despite obvious signs of wear and tear. The food was very good and plen-

tiful. There were no soft drinks, but water, punch, juice, and iced tea were always available. The dive deck was well laid out, although it could get crowded if everyone was suiting up at the same time. Setting up your gear once for the week and not having to lug it anywhere except two steps to the edge of the boat, in our opinion, is the ultimate in luxury for a diver! All the photographers seemed pleased with the setup for cameras, slide developing was available, and there was a fun photo contest for slides and digital at the end of the week. Diving varied from poor to terrific, depending on the site. Some repeat divers had requested new locations, and the captain was trying to accommodate them by exploring new sites, which turned out to be generally disappointing. When he abandoned the search and returned to the sites he knew, diving improved dramatically. There was a great variance in topography from walls to caverns, swim-throughs, sandy bottoms with large coral mounds. More green algae than we expected covered the hard corals at several sites. We saw several black tip sharks, large Nassau groupers, a couple of large barracudas. Lots of beautiful queen, gray, and French angels and other tropicals.

***Nekton Rorqual*, April 2003, Kenneth Cohen, Woodbridge, CT.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Our fourth trip with *Nekton*. Great!

***Nekton Rorqual*, May 2003, Thomas Succimarra, Garrison, NY.** Dives logged: 350. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water:

81 to 83 F. Dive restrictions enforced: depth limit, no drinking with diving. Cay Sal Bank cruise. The weather was perfect, and the diving was great. The food and crew were wonderful. I have been on many live-aboards, and you can't get much better than this. You can now do night dives after dinner rather than having to wait until after the evening lectures/program were over, which could be as late as 9 p.m.

***Nekton Rorqual*, June 2003, Bob Jaco (grnbushlaw@aol.com), E. Greenbush, NY.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 89 F, calm. Although advertised as a new boat, the condition of the boat was less than acceptable. Rooms were adequate in size and air conditioning acceptable. Food was ordinary. The captain is knowledgeable and entertaining. The crew was helpful and friendly. If you want Nitrox, arrange before hand. Dive sites were interesting. Enjoyed seeing the distant lights off Cuba and the two blue holes in Cay Sal. This trip was worth taking, but the price was excessive for the quality of the boat. Either refurbish the boat or lower the price to match the value. Invest in some cleaning aids, paint and new carpet. Hauling camera equipment from the platform area to the camera table was cumbersome. Work area on table was modest considering the number of divers and photographers.

***Nekton Rorqual*, June 2003, Bill Chambers, Brooklyn, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. While the *Rorqual* is worn around the edges

— stained & worn carpets, etc. — the boat works well as a base for diving. The only downside is the constant stair climbing, from the top deck where wetsuits are hung down two flights of stairs to the dive deck and back multiple times during the day. Nitrox (32%) is available. Rooms are relatively spacious with ensuite bathrooms and plenty of fresh & warm water. One rough crossing at night brought into question No-Seasickness claim, but getting back on the boat is still subject to the vicissitudes of the seas. Turbulence between the two hulls can diminish viz at the ladder to almost nil. The crew was excellent, attentive and accommodating. Food was good to excellent and plentiful, though with a full load of divers the buffet line often was long. Nekton's BYOB (including soft drinks) policy irritating given the prices charged. The Cay Lobos itinerary involves lots of steaming time, resulting in only two night dives, one the last night which many deferred on to dry & pack their gear due to early lights. Diving generally was only so-so. Mediocre viz most of the week and modest to strong currents detracted from what we hoped would be a virgin area. Small fish & critters, coral & sponges were good to fair at most sites, and large fish were largely absent except for a blue hole where the *Pilot*, on its Cay Sal Banks itinerary, does shark feeding. The *Rorqual* doesn't do the feeding, but the sharks are still omnipresent. The most colorful diving was at Bimini, the most heavily dived and civilized site we encountered. Dedicated camera table was small & usually crowded. Dedicated camera

tanks next to camera table and on dive deck. E-6 processing on board.

Nekton Rorqual, June 2003, Joseph J. Chudacoff, Redondo Beach, CA.

Vis: 30 to 80 feet. Water: 83 to 86 F. Dives logged: since 1960, 2,000+. Dive restrictions enforced: 130 feet max.

Crew was outstanding. Food was mediocre. Diving not up to Caribbean standards. Area for donning gear was inadequate at best — too congested for 32 divers plus crew.

Nekton, July 2003, Philip Hamilton (Jeepster@scubadiving.com), Sugar Land, TX.

Experience: 101-250 dives.

Vis: 50 to 70 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Cay Lobos itinerary departs from Ft. Lauderdale on Saturdays. They run a shuttle back and forth from the airport throughout the day and deliver the guests to the Las Olas Mall. At 7 p.m., they take the divers to the vessel en masse. One of the ugliest dive boats you will run across. Boxy and square, it looks like a duplex mounted on pontoons. Inside it is roomy and well laid out. The top deck contains the pilot-house, a covered area for dive briefings and shade lovers, and a sundeck complete with hot tub. One flight down is the galley, lounge, camera table, and some of the cabins, while the lowest deck contains more rooms and crew quarters. Suspended at the stern is the dive deck, a hydraulically operated unit which is lowered to the water on site for diving and raised while the vessel is underway. The adverts claim it is seasick proof, but don't count on it. The boat does move, albeit less than a monohull — if you get seasick easily,

you will still need the pills. We had a few uncomfortable folks on board. Due to the distance covered during this itinerary, there are only two night dives, one at Cay Lobos and one at Bimini on the last night, so arrange your flight home accordingly if you want to night dive Friday. The dive deck on the *Rorqual* is generally open from shortly after 8 a.m. until quarter to twelve, and again from about 1:30 p.m. until quarter to six. Often this meant that we got in two dives per site, and except for the first dive of the trip the deck was not crowded. The crew was friendly and competent — and always ready to buddy with you if you needed one. We dove our own profiles, limited only by 130 foot depth limit and no planned deco. Break the rules, and you will be out of the water for 24 hours. While not haute cuisine, the food was very good and plentiful. Nekton encourages BYOB and will stop on the way to the boat for you to buy your own soft drinks and adult beverages, and they provide an ice chest for them. The boat uses steel 95s, which are six pounds more negative than AL80s and give you a bit more bottom time. Nitrox was being installed in July — 16 stations in place. Bring lots of swimsuits and T-shirts, few other items of clothing. No shoes worn all week. Bring more wetsuit than you think, and perhaps even a hood — possible 24 dives during the week will chill you. I wore a 3mm full in avg 83 F water and was comfortable. Water was a bit cloudy, making photos challenging. Did wall dive in Cay Lobos, hole dives in Cay Sal and Anguilla, and reef dives in Bimini.

***Sea Fever*, April 2002, Larry & Fawn Lovecchio (lovecchio@frontier.net), Ignacio, CO.** Vis: 75-100 feet. Water: 78-80 F. Dives logged: Larry 175/Fawn 155. Dive restrictions enforced: 130-foot depth. *Sea Fever* is probably the oldest boat around, but the accommodations are adequate, and the staff is friendly. One female dive-master, B.J., was helpful in saving my wife's dive vacation. Fawn had back pain and B.J. hauled all her gear down the ladder to the water level dive platform where all Fawn had to do was sit on the edge, slip into her gear with B.J.'s help and just roll into the water. Then B.J. carried the gear back up at the end of each dive. The food was excellent and the dive sites around Bimini were full of interesting swim-through topography with healthy coral/sponges and loads of fish. A shark feed was exciting with several reef sharks, nurse sharks, and good-sized grouper. The *Sapona* wreck (an old rumrunner boat between Bahamas and Florida during prohibition) provided every form of sea life imaginable. Macro and wide-angle shots. Saw a young green sea turtle and two huge loggerheads.

***Sea Fever*, November 2002, Dean Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com), Golden Valley, MN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 110 feet. Water: 75 to 82 F, calm. Booked this trip with Green Bay Scuba. *Sea Fever* sells few individual bunks, but they offer links on their website to various dive shops that have purchased the week. This week was a little over \$1,000, normal rate is \$300 to \$600 higher. Most pas-

sengers from the Green Bay area and were nice folks, despite their curious addiction to the Packers. Green Bay Scuba is very easy to deal with, and the shop owner fixed my pressure gauge for next to nothing as a courtesy. He was a real delight to work with and sent us free digital photo files at the end of the trip. Accommodations are clean but Spartan, not much room, bunkbed-style berths, but good A/C, and odor free. The ship's head is noisy, if you are assigned a room near it, you will sleep much better if you place a simple note on the door asking other passengers to use the topside head from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Very little storage space in the rooms. Ample freshwater, they appear to have a high capacity water generator, which can also be noisy. This boat is well powered, three large diesels, and cruises at 15 knots. The gulf stream crossing is a quick three hours. The downside is the noise at full throttle near the stern, and you also will catch a whiff of diesel smoke from time to time. The boat motion can be more severe than the SWATH-type boats, but most of the diving is in protected waters. The boat will, at times, swing widely at anchor, 50 yards or so, making it necessary to wait on the surface at certain dive sites for the boat to swing back to you for re-boarding. It's a fairly heavy boat, compared with the *Blackbeard's* 65-foot sloops, and there are certain moorings that can't hold it when the wind kicks up. This usually means that *Sea Fever* can't moor at the Bimini Barge, which is an excellent Bimini area dive. Another disadvantage to the large size is that when the wind kicks up, the Sea

Fever cannot safely approach Bimini in the dredged channel to the harbor entrance. We were stuck for 24 hours at anchor behind Cat Cay because of this. No diving for that 24 hours, so we watched videos and drank Red's Deadly Rum Punch. One of the two Blackbeard's boats made it into Bimini during the same time, and they got to spend the down time in port. The crew is excellent, Red's cooking is uniformly excellent, although I was surprised to see several guests return his pasta sauce as "too spicy." One passenger had a list of allergies and food intolerances that had 25 items on it, and Red handled it without difficulty. Big breakfasts are cooked to order. The boat offers five dives a day, if you can stand it. The dive briefings are good, and they have a large goodie box for busted dive gear. The topside sun deck is a nice spot for dive intervals. The website lists two hotels to stay at the night before departure. We stayed at the Armada, which was cheap but a bit run down. I've stayed in worse at the same price. Stay at the suggested hotel in South Beach, which is a lot livelier. One guest was from England and completed his 1,000th dive on the boat. The crew printed a certificate of achievement and organized a party for him. The shark dive at the end of the week is at the same spot used by *Blackbeard's*. It was my third shark dive, and I'm starting to rethink the experience. As per standard protocol, everyone was placed in position, backs to the coral, and all divers checked in as OK. A dinghy then motored on the surface with the fish-on-a-spear "shark kabob" and attached it to a line floated

to the surface from a pulley attached to concrete bottom anchor block. As the "kabob" was pulled down sharks started to attack it. One of the sharks struck the kabob near the end attached to the line and then rolled. That shark became entangled in the line and started swimming in large circles, over the heads of the divers. Other sharks kept hitting the "kabob," near the entangled shark. The entangled shark started jerking violently, nearly pulling the divemaster holding the other end off the bottom. Other crewmembers had to help secure the end of the line. I was nervous that the entangled shark would be badly bitten and that might spread blood and flesh onto the circled divers. After 45 seconds the entangled shark escaped, a lucky break for the crew and divers. I discretely asked the crew what the plan might have been had the shark not escaped, and they indicated that they had never seen or heard of anything like this before, and they really didn't have a specific plan, other than to cut the line free, or possibly try to "hold down" the entangled shark to cut the entangling lines. While it's true that the vast majority of shark dives are uncomplicated, it is certainly not a risk-free venture. I did note that section of video from the shark dive was edited out of the final trip video. UW Photography Comments: Large secured multilevel camera table, dedicated rinse tank, all in a shaded and dry area. Quite nice for video or still cameras. (www.seafever.com)

Shear Water, February 2003, Steve & Kathie Payne (kathie@speedex.net), Richland, IN. Experience: 251-500

dives. Vis: 80 to 150 feet. Water: 73 to 79 F, calm. The best dive trip we have ever taken; this was our eighth trip on the *Shear Water*. We began diving on this boat with its prior owner — Gold Coast Charters. Capts. Mike Walker and Kurt Dix remain from those days, and the new staff is equally wonderful — although we really miss Mike's dad, Bill, in the office. Jim & Anna Abernethy have refurbished the salon, refinished the woodwork, added linens and towels (had to bring your own when it was Gold Coast), updated the heads. Our group included a friend of our son; these were his first post certification dives, and the crew was wonderful in helping him become a pretty good diver over the course of the 10 dives. This was a four-night/three-day trip; the cost was \$695 plus \$30 departure tax. This includes everything (don't forget to tip)! First dive was at Sherwood Forestis — always a good site for sharks and we weren't disappointed. Also wonderful corals, fans, sponges, tropicals, and great macro-photography site — beautiful shy and indigo hamlets, butterfly fish, and a perfect jewelfish. Next we dove a site named Tora-Tora-Ramora. This was so nice that we dove it again. The captain asked if we wanted a night dive, and we all were too tired so he headed back to Sandy Key to tuck us in to completely calm, flat waters for the night. The next morning, we first dove a blue hole and then the wreck of the *Theo*. I didn't get to spend too much time on the hole as my "new dive buddy" wasn't comfortable with descending down into it. It was really neat from the top. This wreck present-

ed great opportunities for safe penetration. It has a terrific profile, the prop is intact and there is a plethora of marine life on the ship. The dive on the *Theo* was followed by a shark-feeding dive at Shark Junction. Jim Abernethy and Mike Walker sent down a sealed milk crate with bait to a flat sandy area directly underneath the boat. Then we dropped down and sat there in awe. Sharks everywhere — large, 6 to 8 foot Caribbean reef sharks, at least 20. Also at least a half-dozen grouper in the 40 to 60 lb. range — they were quite friendly and not the least bit worried about the sharks. They parked themselves in the sand with us and watched the show. Our new diver and I went for a brief tour of the coral heads and found a grouper parked at a cleaning station. The last dive day we dove Jew Fish Mountain first — there was a tiger shark just at the periphery of the visibility; it worked its way into about 50 feet but then headed back out. Then came the 10-foot hammerhead. It darted in and left, too. This was followed by the 8-foot bull shark. This doesn't even take the reef sharks into account, and there were at least a dozen, some 7 to 8 feet. The next dive was only about a mile and half away — El Dorado. There we were visited again by the bull and hammerhead sharks. I was putting my new diver back on the boat when the hammerhead came in — close. It took me 248 dives to see one — he saw one on his 7th dive. He was almost out of air, but I still had 2,000 psi; I descended again and sat on the bottom as Jim and Mike took both still and video photography of all the activity. Sharks everywhere; the hammerhead

swam directly over my head — I could have reached up and rubbed its belly, but didn't. There were beautiful lush corals, fans, whips, large and small fish, turtles, even a Spanish dancer nudibranch. Everything was pristine and perfect. We followed this dive with a trip to the White Sand Flats where we found the wild spotted dolphins. We snorkeled with them for about an hour and a half. There were more than a dozen; at one point we were joined by a couple of bottlenose dolphins, but they didn't stay. The spotted dolphins stayed to play and imitated the divers who were using the DPVs — arching and flipping in the water. We finished the trip with a late afternoon and night dive on the *Sugar Wreck*. It is just like diving in an aquarium. Fish so thick you cannot see the wreck — and they don't even move out of the way. Barracuda stacked in rows and it's only 20 feet deep. There used to be several turtles on the wreck, but we only saw one. Beautiful fish everywhere: crabs, eels, lobster, shrimp, blennies in the sand and crevices — every small fish you can imagine. Orange cup anemone on the night dive were just gorgeous. This was simply the most wonderful dive trip. Mike, Jim, Kurt, and cook Kerrie made this an experience that will be hard to surpass. Camera table inside salon; Jim Abernethy is world class photographer and makes certain photographers have more than adequate space and facility — also great at helping with repair or adjustments. Always crew on back of boat to hand down or take up equipment prior to/after dive. (www.scuba-adventures.com/bahamas_liveaboard.shtml)

***Shear Water*, Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, May 2003, Helen Malnar (Helenpm1@aol.com), Tampa, FL.**

Vis: 60 to 90 feet. Water: 80 to 83 F. Experience: 750+ dives. They tout this trip as a dolphin and shark adventure and did they deliver! Snorkeling with wild spotted Atlantic dolphins was worth the price of admission alone. Then shark dives that attracted many of the Caribbean reef sharks so abundant there, throw in a great hammerhead, and you have the shark and dolphin adventure! The *Shearwater* is a live-aboard that leaves from the JASA home of West Palm Beach, FL. The 65-foot boat travels the five-hour crossing of the Gulf Stream and dives the west end of the Bahamas. Our trip kept us pretty much in the Little Bahama Banks, and we saw little land or other boats. *Shearwater* holds 12 divers and four crew members. Jim Abernethy himself was along on this trip and was one of the most enthusiastic hosts I've ever had. During the crossing he shows videos and tells what we will be seeing during the next five days. His passion for diving and his many interests in marine life conservation was evident. As entertaining as he was on the boat, when we got in the water he sprang into action. He videos every dive and shows the video afterward. There is no babysitting or hand holding. You pretty much can dive your own profile and alone, if that's what you want. The restrictions are only no decompression dives and no alcohol before diving. Playing with dolphins is strictly at their discretion, he quickly points out early on. Since he has been diving these waters for many years, he knows just

how to attract them and keep them interested in playing with us. He goes to great lengths to get you as close as the dolphins will allow and makes sure everyone has opportunities to interact with them. Once in the water with them, you feel clumsy, awkward, and slow moving, but you cavort as best you can and savor each moment. We saw sharks on almost every dive, but their actual shark dives are done, not as feeding dives, but more as “shark action” dives. They don’t actually feed the sharks but attract them to where we are by bringing down a closed crate of fish parts. The crate is in the water with us and the sharks swim all around us in good numbers. It is less frenzied and more controlled than a shark feeding dive. While the boat is small, it is comfortable enough with good air conditioning throughout the living area. The divers with cameras had no complaints about space for their equipment, and since most diving is done when you feel like it, the dive deck never seemed too crowded. Night dives were offered every night and most divers got in about five dives per day. Some of the best dive sites were: Mt. Olympus, Sugar Wreck, and Anna’s Wall. The dolphins were, however, my favorite.

The Juliet, August 2003, Steve Clement (dscllement@oecadvantage.net), Tuttle, OK. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 84 F, calm, choppy. The *Juliet* sails out of Miami. Alan and Ire both dive instructors and have logged hundreds of dives between the two. The *Juliet* is a 104 ft, three mast schooner, the ship was well maintained. It has two heads [forward and

aft] both with showers and they are in the process of adding a third head about mid-ships. The *Juliet* takes a maximum of twelve divers with a crew of five. We were impressed with the size of the cabins (double occupancy). We didn’t feel like we were packed in like sardines like some live-aboards. The crew was great. Capt. John, 1st mate John S. are both instructors and the other three crew members are either rescue divers or divemasters. The food outstanding and plentiful, Christy, the ship’s cook, did an outstanding job. The dive briefings were informative and we were allowed to dive our own profiles. The only restrictions was to stay above 130 ft. The reefs are great and the crew did everything they could do to see that everyone had a good time. There was deep sea fishing when we were sailing. We all went lobster hunting twice and the diving was great. It was one of the best dive trips I have been on. (www.sailjuliet.com)

San Salvador

Wind Dancer, July 2002, Barbara. Dives logged: 400+. Weather: warm and sunny most days, seas flat, little current except on one dive. Wore Darlex or 2 mm wetsuit. Viz variable. 130 feet, 500 psi limits not policed. I thought I saw a hammerhead silhouetted in the distance on one dive, there were a very few sharks, and there were a mother and baby dolphin with us most of the time in San Salvador, but other than these sightings there was very little fish life of note, mostly small to medium size tropicals. The walls are dramatic and beautiful, covered with

colorful sponges, and the corals are healthy. The tops of the walls and the shallower reefs in San Salvador, especially Tunnel of Love and Magic Bus, had quite a bit of algae coverage. We generally did a morning site twice in a row and an afternoon and night site three times in a row. On the fifth day we dove The Abyss (one of the better sites) at the southern end of San Salvador Island in the morning, but after some folks complained about the current we moved to La Crevasse (fairly good site the first time, boring by the third dive) and stayed there for four straight dives. At Conception Island we dove Missing Link, Hocus Pocus, and Chutes & Ladders. I would say all three dives were average dives by Caribbean standards, with Missing Link the least appealing and Hocus Pocus the best. At San Salvador Island we dove Free Willy, Peekaboo, Tunnel of Love, Magic Bus, The Abyss, and La Crevasse; the walls were impressive, the reefs and fish life weren't. On the last diving day (Friday) there was one dive at 7 a.m. around Conception, which many of us skipped because we hadn't seen much on the trip to make getting up early worth while. The cleanliness was there on this trip; the food was good, and the desserts were outstanding. Tony, the cook, was trained as a pastry chief, and it was evident. I think he is going to transfer to the *Sun Dancer II* along with the captain, activities director, and Jerry, one of the stewards. The first mate Brett tries to be a curmudgeon but can't quite pull it off. He saved at least two underwater cameras and has a great collection of whale and dolphin

photos that you should coax him to show. He and Ali, the always good-humored activities director in training, rapidly became diver favorites. There was obvious tension on the boat from the time we boarded. By the end of the trip we had found out the reason, but it should not have been evident to us, the customers, and it should not have been allowed to permeate the atmosphere on the boat. The itinerary was not as promised in the Peter Hughes website and brochure. The website said Cat Island was included in the trip, that there would be two dives on the Friday morning before coming back to Georgetown, and that there would be five and a half days of diving. Cat Island was eliminated for some reason. When we asked the captain why we were only doing one dive on Friday and why it had to be at 7 a.m., he said that they had to get back to Georgetown by noon on Friday, because the stores closed early, and they had to prepare for the next trip. When it was pointed out that the website said two dives, he said the write up was 10 years old and was from the previous operator of the *Wind Dancer*. Huh? The crew and captain were not familiar with dive sites; on one occasion they borrowed a book from a passenger to try to find a site. This may be the reason we stayed at the same sites for so many dives. We stayed an extra couple of days in Georgetown at the Peace and Plenty. Our two attempts to dive were thwarted because the dive boat was somewhere else both times. The service and accommodations at the Peace and Plenty were great. The food was average. Georgetown is really, real-

ly small, and everything closes before church on Sunday, so there is not much to do but sit by the pool or bar.
(www.peterhughes.com)

***Wind Dancer*, July 2003, Alan and Barbara Fischl, Great Neck, NY.**

Left from Georgetown in the Bahamas and diving at San Salvador, Conception Island, and Rum Cay. The diving was typical southern Bahamas diving — some spectacular sites, swim throughs, grottos, walls, great visibility, but not a lot of fish, although we did get to see a number of reef and bull sharks, mostly off of Conception Island. Since the boat is changing its venue to Tobago in October of 2003, there's not much point in discussing the diving in greater detail. The boat is still a first class operation with good food and amenities and an outstanding crew. We did have some trouble with the air conditioning in our cabin and, although the engineer was able to fix it for most of the time, we did have a couple of uncomfortably warm nights. All in all, if you like live-aboards, the *Wind Dancer* is about as good as it gets in the Caribbean. (We have logged about 700 dives, mostly in the Caribbean, but also in Australia, Fiji, and the Coral Sea.)

BELIZE

***Belize Aggressor*, February 2003, Fred Swerdlin (pfollyred@swbell.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, choppy, no currents. We were picked up and taken to the boat with our luggage. The principle group

charter, of 16 persons' luggage, on an earlier Continental flight did not arrive, 25 pieces total, and would not arrive for another 24 hours. Although we were asked, the captain decided that the B/A III would stay in port for another 24 hours until the luggage did arrive. The charter group trip leader did not want to use borrowed equipment for any of the dives and especially the dive computers. Since we would be four hours to the dive site, if we had elected to leave on-time, it would have meant we would have to go back to port and pick up the luggage ourselves, if arrangements could not be made for Continental Air Lines to deliver the luggage. When we finally did leave port, there were some problems on the way with the steering and exhaust manifold that allowed exhaust to enter the passenger passageway, setting off the smoke detectors. We finally arrived at the dive site, but the captain did not want our first dive to be a night dive, so we had to wait until morning, before we could take our first dive. After our second dive, the O2 meter broke and the crew had to obtain a spare from another dive boat that was in the area for the rest of the trip. The dive sites' diving, accommodations, and the diving was great, as they were on the *Kona Aggressor*. The food was great and plenty of it, and the crew worked well together, although there seem to some conflict between the captain and crew. Tuesday morning, after our first dive, the hot water heater broke and could not be repaired. So for the rest of the trip, we had to make do without hot water. The crew responded with an innovation by heating up some hot water in the galley coffee maker,