

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,

and placing it in a five-gallon plastic jug, punching holes in it and pouring it on people while they were showering on the dive deck with the cold water running; kudos for the crew.

Wednesday, we were supposed to transit to the Blue Hole, with a checkout deep dive Tuesday. The trip was called off because "the visibility was not good." From my 6.5 years of sea duty on cruisers and destroyers in the U.S. Navy, it appeared to me that visibility was at least five to eight miles. So we were treated to a sunrise dive Thursday morning that we also had on the *K/A II* in Hawaii. It was great watching the night critters go into hiding and the day critters adventuring out for the new day. Friday, our final two dives started at 5:30 a.m., then we had breakfast and back into the water and out by 8:30 a.m., then the four-hour transit back to port. Upon our arrival, they immediately went about preparing for the next week's trip. The hot water heater was changed out in about three hours, and we had hot water once again by 5:30 p.m. in time for our dinner on shore. But Saturday morning, getting ready to leave the boat, the hot water had been secured, unknown to us, and we had to take cold showers before departing the boat. Some other comparisons follow: The *K/A* had ice machines and soda wand on both the dive deck and the sun deck, but the *B/A* had them only on the sun deck, but the *B/A* crew did provide ice at the meals on the main deck in the dining area. The menu board on the *K/A* identified where and what was for dinner hours before the meal, but on the *B/A* only identified what. We were not greeted at the baggage claim

area by anyone who had *Aggressor* identification on him or her, only afterwards outside the baggage area there was someone from the crew greeted us, but the *K/A* crew greeted us at the baggage claim area. The hot tub and the selection of VHS tapes on the *B/A* were much better than the *K/A*. The dive briefings on the *B/A* were much more detailed and colorful than the *K/A*. The shower in my berthing compartment #1 was made for someone less than 6', but I had no problem on the *K/A* being 6'2". The *Kona Aggressor* was great in every detail. It is surprising the difficulties this boat had since returning from a yard period in Louisiana less than six months earlier. Further, I had attempted calling *Aggressor* at least five times to talk with management over the last four weeks, but ended up talking with the agent that I booked my trip with and using e-mail once to attempt to communicate with management. After four weeks, a voucher came in the mail for a 10% discount on another *Aggressor* trip for the both of us. We lost a full day's diving for my wife and me, 18% of the diving, the two days diving Friday morning was much too early for us, and so we sat them out. I sent a response to the management by mail for the discount on a future trip, wanting to discuss the problems on this past trip and received a response by email, 3/26, that someone would get back in touch with me after 4/1, but here it is 4/15/03 and no contact.

(www.aggressor.com/ba_home.html)

Belize Aggressor, March 2003, Paul Schmieder (pschmieder@aol.com),

Bellville, TX. Dives logged: 96 (ADW o/w). Vis: 12 to 60 feet. Water: 82 to 83 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130-foot limit for Great and Blue Hole, otherwise, responsible for self and buddy. Thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Everything was smooth from airport transfers out of Belize city to cabin accommodations, pre-dive briefings, meals, slide shows, and first-class care by the crew (Chris and Scott). Capt. Sam provided good diving under adverse weather conditions, which finally improved on the last day. Cabin and food service by Barbara and Thelma also good. Diving the Barrier Reef included excellent sites though conditions caused poor viz and some difficult diving (currents and wind), but that was not due to the *BA III*. I'd do it again! P.S. I'm submitting this — my first! — entry because I found the Chapbook to be an excellent resource for choosing Belize and the *Aggressor*. I encourage others also to submit as a resourceful guide.

Belize Aggressor, July 2003, Mona Cousens, Santa Barbara, CA.

Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, no currents. I did not care for the dive schedule. We were forced to eat dinner at 6pm to accommodate the night dive schedule, the dive being done after dinner. As it was dark around 6:30, I would have preferred the dive first and then a later dinner. The air conditioning did not work properly in the rooms or the salon, which made the evening meal quite warm and uncomfortable in the dining room. The outside temp was

very hot and humid. The corals of Belize are still beautiful (this is our 6th trip to dive Belize), although you have to travel to specific spots to see them; we spent most of our time off of Long Caye and Half Moon Caye. The fish population has been lessened over the years, but I still always enjoy the beauty of Belize. We felt the trip was overpriced for the area, and did not appreciate the fact that at the farewell meeting, the captain strongly suggested we leave a 15% tip per person for the crew. This was something new to me, as all the other dive operations I have been with suggest a per diem tip suggestion in their pre-cruise brochure.

Belize Aggressor, August 2003, Reed Nescher (reed@nescher.com),

Beaumont, CA. Vis: 80-200+ ft. Water: 80-84 F. Dives logged 3500+. Sunny and dry. Calm and flat, small swell, light winds. Skin or 3 mil spring suit. Currents: little. Dive your own profile 130 ft limit enforced. Went as a single and end up with a great roommate. Boat boards at 2:00 pm Saturday and depending on conditions and the Captain you sail at 6:00 or early next morning. The first sight is a check out dive of sorts, but still great. They usually stay for two dives per sight. At lunch they move the boat for the afternoon and night dive sight. The night dive is always the afternoon sight so that you know it and can feel comfortable. This boat will allow you to get in twenty-six dives or more if you are an animal and using nitrox. All you have to do is let them know you are going in and there is no DM on deck. The crew is great and works hard to

make it feel like your boat, filling tanks (including nitrox), cleaning, cooking, diving, and a shore excursion to Half-Moon Caye (pronounced "Key") to see the boobies nesting. This area has some of the best macro and small critters any where in the Western Hemisphere. The soft corals are abundant, lush, and healthy. I took a digital photo class from Rod Klein and improved both my still and video skills. Got a couple of really great shots including a frogfish sitting on a red rope sponge. My second trip aboard this boat. We did the Blue Hole on Tuesday as well as Half-Moon Caye. The food was good and plentiful. These people have this stuff down pretty well and except for a broken air conditioner it went without any problems. The air made the most difference at the dock, out at sea the breeze cooled things down nicely. What you see is dependent on your skill and experience level. Some people just do not see anything while others see only the big stuff and therefore come back a little disappointed. There is so much here that it is hard not to see a lot of critters. The key is slow down and look at everything closely or go with dive master Chris who will show you just about anything you are looking for and then some. This whole crew earns their tips and then some. Most of the diving is done sixty miles out in and around the Lighthouse Atoll. The outer walls are pristine as well as the swim troughs packed with silversides. This is easy diving for all skill levels and challenging enough for the advanced diver as long as he has an interest in the things that live in the sea. The only thing

missing from these dives is a wreck. The boat accommodates 18 divers and we had only 17 of them sail date. Even with a full boat there is plenty of room for everyone. The rooms are large and each has its own head and shower. The beds are upper and lower with the lower the largest of course. Dining is either forward or alfresco on the sun deck. Breakfast starts at seven, lunch at noon, and dinner at 6:00 pm.

Nekton Pilot, January 2003, Bill Dausses (wfdauss@bartnet.net), Bartlesville, OK. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. My third return trip on the Nekton. I like everything about the boat, the trip, the crew, the food, and the diving. This is laid back, easy diving at its best. Steel 95 tanks and long bottom times. Did 25 dives with a total bottom time in excess of 27 hrs; half the dives exceeded 100 feet, and I always had plenty of air left after each dive. Lighthouse Reef and Halfmoon Caye are super sites for color, clarity, and outstanding walls. The highlights were the numerous octopuses and green morays. Big grouper and tarpon are abundant, and there were plenty of big lobsters and channel crabs. Night diving is a real hoot here as the reef is simply alive and spectacular both in the shallows and on the walls. Several eagle rays and stingrays but only one or two sharks. Last year I did spot a pod of dolphins and a black marlin cruising the wall. The *Nekton Pilot* is still in good shape and the food was plentiful and delicious. Fresh baked cookies in the morning, an afternoon snack, and

desert or popcorn after the night dive. The crew was quite helpful and a lot of fun. Several new divers were present and they went out of their way to help them with anxieties and safely adapt to buoyancy in saltwater. They also let the veterans dive as they wanted within safety limits. The plumbing went down for about two hours one day but the crew jumped on it immediately and replaced a pump that went out. The last cruise for Captain John as he was going into business for himself in Key Largo. Belize during January is not immune to the cold fronts that sweep down from the north and outside temps, winds and rain can be a problem. Our trip temps ranged from 72 to 83 degrees.

(www.nektoncruises.com/Pilot/Pilot.aspx)

Nekton Pilot, February 2003, Jim Virgil (jvirgil@IMBRIS.com), Coeur d'Alene, ID. Dives logged: 500+. Vis: 80-100 feet. Water: 79 F. Dive restrictions enforced: 130. Service and food on the boat was as good as usual; the diving was pretty pathetic. We were on Long Cay all but one day, and we shared the dive sites with the *Aggressor* and *Dancer* and at least five or six smaller crafts. Though the visibility was supposed to be 80 feet or better, the water always had particulates, and we even ran into the stray toilet paper on occasion. Ridiculous. The captain said they could not move because of the wind, but it seems to me with all of the reefs that Belize has to offer that the boats could spread out a bit. We saw no big fish at all (not even a nurse shark). Several divers did see eagle rays, but we saw nothing except tropicals, and

they seemed shy. I guess I would be shy also if I was exposed to about 70 divers. We were on the same itinerary three years ago, and we had plenty of big fish and good visibility. Perhaps the Belizeans are overfishing. It is possible that this trip was an anomaly.

Sun Dancer II, September 2002, Brian, Roswell, GA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 3 to 75 feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm, choppy. Best of the Peter Hughes boats we have been on. Good, fun crew made for an enjoyable week. Hurricane Isador affected the weather causing the need to adjust the normal dive site schedule. Visibility was not great due to the windy conditions and the tide effects on the mangrove atolls. Not much to see in terms of large or even large numbers of fish but the corals were truly outstanding. Some of the most beautiful reef we have encountered in the Caribbean. Belize is an easy trip from Miami or Dallas, and the usual Peter Hughes service awaits from the time you arrive until the time you are dropped back off at the airport. The food could have been better and more timely and I understand that this situation has been addressed. UW Photography Comments: Spacious table for all photographers. (www.peterhughes.com/phsunII/sunmain.htm)

Sun Dancer II, December 2002, John (john.sommerer@jhuapl.edu), Silver Spring, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm, choppy, surge, no currents. Great boat, great service (despite them being short two crew that

week). Thought I would not like the more “organized” Peter Hughes approach after being spoiled by smaller, Indo-Pacific live-a-boards, but it was a well-run and service-oriented operation. Contrary to other reports on Peter Hughes, gratuity was never mentioned (not once). Warm towel and shoulder rub was there after every dive (even tried to duck it a few times — no luck). Fantastic cook! I wanted to just steal the seafood gumbo all for myself one day at lunch. Diving pleasant, but unexceptional. Possibly the bad weather we had for most of the week cut down on the number of pelagics, but the coral was significantly less healthy than when we were in Belize exactly three years previously. Very limited critter population, too. Previous trip, I greatly preferred Glover’s Reef to Lighthouse (the *Nekton Pilot* did both, as well as Gladden Spit and Sapodilla Cays), but the *SDII* shuttled back and forth between the same two walls on Lighthouse all week. Shore excursion to Half Moon Cay for boobies and frigates worthwhile, though our picnic got rained out. No trip to Blue Hole due to high winds, but that was fine with us. Would do it again when I can’t face multi-time-zone travel, but otherwise, Indo-Pacific here we come (back). Highly recommend Chaa Creek Lodge in San Ignacio for land-side adventure. You can even use your housed video if you go on the Actun Tunichil Maknal cave expedition.

***Sun Dancer II*, April 2003, Martha & Jeff Hubbard (hubbard182@att.net), Glenmont, NY.** Experience: Over 1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet.

Water: 80 F, choppy, no currents. The week’s diving is five days plus three hours Friday morning. One could do 26 dives. Usually the two morning dives are at one site, two afternoon and one night dives at another. Excellent walls, bommies and channels; minimal current. Peter Hughes comfort and amenities continue — hot chocolate (with Irish Cream, if you like) after the night dive! Meats and vegs are fresh and varied. The cooking is spicier and greasier than we like and can cause discomfort when diving right after meals, as in the night dive after dinner. This is one of several reasons we prefer dinner after the night dive. (Our introduction to live-aboard cooking, years ago and also on a Peter Hughes boat, was the legendary Sylvia, a Belizean who told us there are cooking tricks that minimize gas and discomfort while diving.) Desserts and snacks were excellent. Somehow, the crew maintains their enthusiasm while taking excellent care of week after week of divers. A few times, one of us skipped a dive and there was always a crew member on the dive who was ready for a buddy. The passengers were pretty tame, and we didn’t see anyone pushing the limits. Nitrox 32 is \$150/diver/week (no credit for the air you didn’t use!) and fills were between 3,100 and 3,300 psi. A fire drill put the passengers in lifejackets on the top deck: “... we let the water level reach the deck then launch the rafts.” We went below after the drill, which may have been shorter than usual, and found fire hoses all over and the crew deployed in fire suits with independent air supplies. There are now excellent

connections through Texas and Charlotte to Belize. A Miami transfer is no longer the price of visiting Belize. The Fort George Radisson Hotel (where the boat docks) is a reasonable place to spend an extra day or two in comfort.

CAYMAN ISLANDS

Cayman Aggressor, August 2002, Kitty Huntley, San Diego, CA. Vis: 20 to 100 feet. Water: 82-84 F. Began diving before log books — 1969 (150-200 dives). Dive restrictions enforced: ecological habitat — don't touch. Buoyancy some hadn't mastered and some destruction occurred. People who haven't completely mastered buoyancy control, as well as various motion techniques for diving in close proximity to living creatures, are living eco-terrorists and should be removed from the area and taught how to dive prudently. I saw pieces of reef kicked off. One person even stood on the reef! Also, an overweighted kicks too much and probably is not comfortable in the water yet, left alone.
(www.aggressor.com/ca_home.html)

Cayman Aggressor, December 2002-January 2003, Jeffrey Kearns. Dives logged: 750+. Awful experience. My wife and I had been on the *Fiji Aggressor* and had an incredible time. This was a waste of time and money. Our main complaint was the Captain. He was aloof, unfriendly. His choices of dive sites were disappointing. We did not choose to vacation on a live-aboard to fight for buoy space in the shadow of 5 cruise ships. I am sympa-

thetic to the Captain's decision to shelter the boat from the weather, but by Tuesday the seas were light (as reported by the local news) and he continued to position the boat off 7 mile beach. (The *Aggressor* does not travel to the other islands for almost the entire winter.) Tom did not once discuss these issues with the guests. Does he get a fuel saving bonus? By Wednesday, we wanted to get off the boat because we were so bored with the diving. When on the *Fiji Aggressor*, we had horrible weather with 7+ foot seas and the Captain let the guests have input to the dive sites (even with the weather we had an amazing time). On Thursday afternoon Tom decided to move the boat within a couple hundred meters of the cruise ships and dive in front of a Texaco fuel depot in the flight path of the airport (he must have wanted to get home quickly on Friday). This was the worst site of the trip — bad visibility, etc. One of the more experienced couples had dived this site prior to getting on the boat, but Tom did not care. Tom's response to the planes buzzing overhead was that they stopped at 11 pm. Great, I go to a tropical island for a vacation and I get to sit and look at a Texaco oil station and get jet fuel dumped on me. I should have stayed in Los Angeles and spent time under LAX. To top off a pathetic performance, we docked at a pier that was offloading cargo over the ship's bow. There is nothing like having a cocktail party and watching heavy cargo getting stacked 30 meters from you. On a positive note, the food was the best that I have had on any dive trip outside the U.S. Andrew did an excellent job and