

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Tahiti

Tahiti Aggressor, November 2002, Richard J. Troberman (tmanlaw@aol.com), Seattle, WA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy, currents. The *Tahiti Aggressor* (formerly the *Fiji Aggressor*) began service in Tahiti in late September 2002. It is a relatively stable 106-foot catamaran that takes up to 16 divers. All diving is done from a skiff that is hydraulically lowered into the water from the back of the dive deck. Each diver has a station on the skiff where all the dive equipment is stored. The tanks are refilled in place on the skiff. The Tuamotu Atolls are famous for pass flying. After a check-out dive in Rangiroa (where we met the boat), we began the all-night crossing to Fakarava. The crossing through open water was rough, and seasickness medication is a must for most people. Due to weather, this was only the second time in five weeks that the boat was able to make the crossing to Fakarava, but the diving was well worth the effort. A pass diving specialty course was given on the way to Fakarava, and each diver was equipped with a Dive Alert, a reef hook, and a safety sausage, and each buddy team was also provided with an EPIRB signaling device. Before each dive Pierre, the French divemaster, gave a briefing. The most important information was "Follow me," but this was not as easy as it sounds. There can be up to seven different currents in a pass at the same time and many divers had a hard time

staying behind Pierre due to the ripping currents. We encountered scores of sharks on every dive, as well as huge schools of surgeonfish and paddletails. On two of the dives at Fakarava, we were joined by a friendly dolphin that allowed the divers to scratch its belly. We did reef dives and corner dives away from the current. Flame angels were everywhere, as were Napoleon wrasse, the occasional mantas, a stonefish, and a huge variety of reef fish. Two fresh waters showers are on the dive deck, and fresh towels were provided after every dive. Doms, our cook, is a part owner in a resort and restaurant in Tahiti and fills in on the *Aggressor* periodically to satisfy his diving urges. The food was excellent and plentiful, and Doms was always creative with the leftovers. (www.aggressor.com)

Tahiti Aggressor, December 2002, Bill & Jeanne Downey (downdive@attbi.com), Baden, PA. Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Water: 80 to 82 F. Great way to dive around Rangiroa, which has the best diving in French Polynesia. The boat is a catamaran, so there's lots of space, but watch out for cabin 9, which used to be the darkroom — cramped, no windows. They're supposed to give a discount for staying in this room. This is pass diving; the current was really ripping sometimes, but overall the currents were not as strong as we expected. Everyone is issued a safety sausage and air horn. The coral is healthy but low due to the current. There were only one or two dives we did not see sharks. Lots of fish life, not so many invertebrates. A few mantas,

dolphins underwater several times, saw a huge hammerhead cruising beneath us at 150 feet. Arrive in Papeete a day early and walk or take “Le Truck” into town to see the waterfront and the local fish market. Wonderful batik fabrics in the stores. Bring something for seasickness, as some of the crossings are long, and a catamaran is not stable in open ocean.

Tahiti Aggressor, January 2003, Scott Kramer (scottkra@earthlink.net), Los Angeles, CA. Vis: 50-80 feet.

Water: 80-83 F. Dives logged: 430. Dive restrictions enforced: nitrox levels. Formally the *Fiji Aggressor*, the boat was in good working order, despite problems the week before. The weather was surprisingly good considering it was the rainy season. They have increased the number of divers from 16 to 18 by turning the dark room/laundry room into Room #9. This places a real strain on the room in the skiff — just too crowded. The extra divers didn't hurt the meals though, still plenty of room and wonderful food. Dome should be congratulated for the best lobster tails I've had on a dive boat. We only moved three times all week, but this was due to the way the diving is done in the Tahiti lagoons; got to follow the tides and openings. We basically spent two days in the Rangiroa harbor. There was a lot of repetition in the sites, but don't think this could be helped. This might change when they have more experience in the area. Took the Nitrox course from Marcie, the best — fast and painless. Each diver was given safety sausages, Air Alerts, GPS unit,

and reef hooks. Attention given to safe diving was welcomed, especially with so many divers in the water on drift dives with mucho current. Briefings were well done, but problems were had with the class 5 divemaster, Pierre. He didn't seem to care if anyone was in the water with him. He just went on and did his own thing, if that was to swim as fast as he could into the blue, well ... Saw sharks on 21 of 22 planned dives. On the last dive, we were disappointed that we didn't have any sharks to see when on our safety stop, four dolphins came up and swam among us for at least five minutes. Air Tahiti did well in the transportation department. The two long crossings on the *Aggressor* were both made as meals were being served. This can't be avoided, but the timing can be refined a bit.

Tahiti Aggressor, February 2003, Ron Duckett (duckster1@iowatelecom.net), Randalia, IA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, surge, currents. Exciting diving. Pass dives had strong current and were vigorous, but pre-dive briefings were excellent. Corner dives had lots of fish including sharks. There were always three divemasters in the water that were helpful. Of 22 possible dives (no night dives), encountered sharks on all but two. Most locations had vis of 100-plus. Food was great. Cabin had adequate storage. All areas clean. Two large camera tables with several air hoses. Rinse tanks kept fresh. Crew helpful handling cameras.

Tahiti Aggressor, March 2003, Mel Butler (mbutler621@aol.com),

Claremont, CA. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 84 F. Depth/time limits for safety. This makes Cozumel's drift dives seem tame! This was the best organized dive operation that I have experienced. A 30-foot skiff for 16 divers is across the stern in a hydraulic sling. Each diver suits up on dive deck, then climbs in skiff to put on weight belt, tank, fins, mask, etc. The skiff is lowered into the water and takes divers to dive site. All dives are drift dives, some slow and many fast current dives through channels into coral atoll lagoons. Three guides on every dive. Must dive as group after excellent dive briefings. *Aggressor* furnishes safety sausage, dive alert, strobe, whistle, and mirror to all divers. No night dives. Nitrox available. Recovery into skiff easy. Towels on skiff, on dive deck. Excellent camera and equipment rinsing facilities. Crew friendly. Quite spacious rooms and individual toilet facilities. Air conditioned rooms. Excellent food. A great week!

Tahiti Aggressor, August 2003, Linda Dunn (deep66@earthlink.net), Riverside, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, calm, currents. Rangiroa is beautiful, and it's a good thing since due to a blown engine we never left the lagoon. The boat is supposed to move to several other locations but couldn't since they couldn't get the part to repair it for days. A couple of divers left and went home. We stayed. The dive crew did their best to entertain us, doing the same dives for a week. Food and lodgings were top notch. But the disappointment was in not leaving

Rangiroa. *Aggressor* offered us \$1,000 each vouchers, for future trips, but with restrictions. What we did see was sharks, lots of them, on nearly every dive, and dolphins on at least half the 20 dives. Turtles, schools of jacks and snappers, eels, hard coral, no soft corals. Visibility in Rangiroa is very good, currents strong, so they hand out sausages and EPIRBs (but only one per buddy team — and to the men, I noticed, more than the women). The boat is so comfortable that the week of doing the same dives wasn't as bad as it could have been. We talked to a group of divers from Madrid who dived the week after we left and they said the captain didn't want to leave Rangiroa their week either, due to weather, but they insisted, so he finally did, but not to the places advertised.

Tahiti Aggressor, September 2003, Harry A. Kreigh, Sacramento, CA. Sunny to partly cloudy with no rain (highs around 85 F and generally light winds (5-10 mph). Light to choppy seas, mild to strong currents and some surge; water temperature: 80-82, 75-150 ft visibility (limited visibility inside the lagoons). Recommended for experienced divers only due to the strong currents. The *Tahiti Aggressor* (formerly the *Fiji Aggressor*) is a metal catamaran (approximately 105-ft long with a wide beam) with 3 decks. The partially covered sundeck has lounge chairs and hammocks. The second deck has a combination dining room, spacious salon and bar with the requisite audio/video systems and reference library. A functioning hot tub and patio tables are outside. The cabins are large

with bunk beds (lower bed is queen size), plenty of storage space and en suite sink, bathroom and shower. Linens were changed daily. A/C in each cabin is adjustable for personal comfort. They provided robes. Meals were buffet. Breakfast consisted of hot/cold cereal, pancakes, bacon and cook-to-order eggs. Coffee/tea, a variety of juices, iced tea and a soda fountain were available around the clock. Fresh fruit and croissants or French bread were available at all meals. Both lunch and dinner consisted of varied menus with hot entrees (fish, beef, chicken, lamb, chili or spaghetti), vegetables and salads. Vegetarian options were offered. Hearty soups were served at lunch. Baked desserts (or ice cream) were served at dinner. Beer/wine are complimentary. Snacks were served after the first and third dives (popcorn, crackers, potato chips, peanuts, etc.). The lack of cookies was disappointing. Dives were generally scheduled at 7:00, 10:00, 1:00 and 3:30 daily. No night dives were offered due to increased activity of large tiger sharks at night (something I wouldn't mind seeing!). Nitrox (30%) was available at extra cost (\$100 for the trip). All dives were led by 3 experienced divemasters and preceded by detailed briefings. Dives were limited to 45 minutes and 110 ft (<130 ft was acceptable). Divers were expected to remain with the group (on pass dives) and surface with a divemaster or a buddy. Safety equipment, including Dive-Alert, safety sausage and EPIRBS transmitter, and reef hooks were provided. Diving was done from one aluminum skiff (about 25 ft in

length) and all sites were 5-15 minutes from the *Tahiti Aggressor* moorings. Diving gear and tanks were stored on the skiff. A giant stride entry was made from either side of the skiff, and surfaced divers were assisted by the crew while climbing back onto the skiff via the ladder. The skiff was raised in a cradle to deck level for easy entry/exit from the *Aggressor*. Aluminum tanks (80 ft³) were consistently filled to 3000 psi. Fresh water showers, towels and rinse tanks were provided on the dive deck. Towels and bottled water were provided on the skiff. A Pass Flying/Drift Diver certification course was held during the trip at no extra cost. Dependent on the incoming tides, 1-2 pass dives were made daily. Reef hooks were used at the mouths and in the channels of the passes to view circling sharks, barracuda and other schooling fish. Other dives were reefs and corners near the passes. The reef topography was flat in the shallows (25-40 ft) gradually descending to the edge of a sloping wall (60-70 ft). Due to the exceptional visibility, pelagics in the blue were easily seen and deep diving (>100 ft) was not necessary. The pass dives were an adrenaline rush. We literally flew through the channels and it was a challenge to avoid colliding with the reef and other divers. 50-100 gray reef sharks circled the passes and maneuvered effortlessly in the strong currents while we struggled to stay in position, even with reef hooks, looking on in amazement. The pass dives at Apataki and Rangiroa were quite spectacular. There were extended encounters with many hawksbill turtles, several were too busy feeding to be bothered

by curious divers and photographers, playful bottlenose dolphins and several beefy silvertip sharks. Mantas were seen on several dives, often quite close. An impressive sailfish (6-7 ft) slowly cruised above us and flared its large dorsal fin before darting into the blue. After surfacing from one dive, excitement peaked with the anticipation of a bait ball as thousands of birds were observed on the water near the skiff. Divers quickly became snorkelers and chased the migrating baitfish. Unfortunately, we arrived too early for the show. No underwater predators were seen, but one mobula did swim by us. Large schools of snappers and barracuda (and solitary great barracuda) were seen frequently. Other reef residents included Napoleons, dogtooth tuna, lionfish and many species of butterfly, angel (particularly flame angels), wrasse and triggerfish. Anemones with clownfish, nudibranchs, tridacna clams, cowries, pipefish and scorpionfish were rarely seen. The 45-minute dive limit was somewhat restrictive. Other rules and safety precautions were reasonable. Without soft corals, the reefs lack color and variety and reef dives were often indistinguishable and repetitive. The divemasters were not interested in finding unusual critters, probably because this is not a great destination for macro subjects. However, they did point out the larger pelagics. The skiff was slightly crowded with 18 divers and 3 divemasters. Pickups were usually prompt, but I waited 5-10 minutes on the surface after a few dives. Some hook-in spots for the initial pass dives were crowded with divers. At one site in particular, it was almost impossible

to see the sharks through the continuous wall of bubbles (I relocated for a better view). The dining room was warm, probably due to its close proximity to the kitchen, and crawling bugs (possibly roaches) were occasionally present throughout the boat. Not serious problems though. Upon arrival, there was a strong mildew odor in the cabins, but it diminished during the trip. We flew into Papeete and spent the night (at the Royal Tahitian) before flying to Rangiroa to meet the boat (spent a few hours and had breakfast at Raira Lagoon hotel before boarding in the afternoon). On our return, we had a day room at the Sheraton in Papeete. Very luxurious hotel and quite expensive (\$20-25 for lunch). It is a short ride (on Le Truck for \$1) to downtown for cafes and a fabulous 2- story "mall" featuring a fish market, food vendors, tattoo parlors, handicrafts and tropical clothing. Black pearl shops are everywhere (and a vendor even sets up shop on the *Aggressor* on the last day).

HAWAII

Kona Aggressor II, September 2002,
Keith & Ellen Irwin (irwinkw@earthlink.net), San Jose, CA.

Experience: 101250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, surge, no currents. This is easy diving with a great crew and superb food and service. The boat is an 87-foot catamaran with five ensuite cabins off the large salon and a quad cabin on the top deck. All had queen size beds below and a single bunk above. A sink, vacuum-flush head (no smells), and a shower are in each stateroom. A/C is con-