

single divers. There was a lot of mechanical noise on this boat. There was a salon with two comfortable sofas on the lower deck. The main deck offered a hot tub and the dining area. There was a partially covered sun deck up top. A few more chaise lounges would have been nice, since our whole group gravitated there between dives. There were movies in the salon for those energetic enough to sit upright. The food was very good and endless in supply. Jurgen was a creative chef who made staples like tomato soup special with his seasonings. All the divers, from the meat-and-potato-trenchermen to the California cuisine crowd, were happy with the meals. Sweet snacks were offered, right on the dive deck if you liked, between morning dives, and savory snacks between afternoon dives. Fish and shellfish were each served twice. The Captain's Dinner featured beef prime rib and lobster tails. Vegetables were well prepared, and salads were not just shredded iceberg. Ah, the desserts! Nuts, fruits, chips, and popcorn were always available, and the boat served Honduran coffee. Cokes, wine, and beer were free. The first drink of the day marked your last dive of the day. We have only been diving three years and are far from jaded. The condition of the reefs in the Bay Islands and the paucity of the sea life were disturbing. As we were driven to the airport at the end of the week, we saw nine large trawlers docked in Roatan. Does their presence explain why some reef tops looked as if they had been tilled? There was high wind most of the

week and conditions limited the access to sites around Roatan. The captain did manage to take us to Utila and Cayos Cochinos. Cocos seamount off Cayos Cochinos was the best site we visited. We also enjoyed Tavaina's Wall and Caribe Point off Roatan. The *Aggressor* boat swings on its mooring line, creating a pseudo-current under the boat. Getting back to the boat required considerable exertion, including a last desperate lunge from the hang chain to the ladder. Service on the dive deck was good. We were the only two divers who chose to do the last dive of the week. Although the boat was going to return to port as soon as the dive deck was closed, neither the captain nor the two divemasters acted as if it were an imposition to keep the boat on the dive site for just the two of us. No one in our group wants to return to the Bay Islands. The reason lies in the condition of the reefs, not in the *Bay Islands Aggressor*. One big advantage of the live-aboard: what no see-ums? The *Aggressor* encourages the use of Nitrox for safety reasons and charges \$100 per week for unlimited Nitrox fills.

TURKS AND CAICOS

***Aggressor*, September 2002, David Haupt (dbhaupt@yahoo.com), Louisville, KY.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 75 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, no currents. Breakfast is from 7:00-8:00 a.m. Two dives, then lunch at 12:30 p.m. Two more dives, dinner at 6:30 p.m. Night dive follows. Hot towels and hot chocolate awaited

us upon surfacing from the night dives. After the night dive, most watched one of numerous DVDs that one of the divers brought. After boarding, you set up your gear. Each station has a seat that lifts and you can store your gear. Once you put your BC on a tank it stays there for the week. The only thing you remove is your first stage between dives to signal that you need your tank filled. If diving Nitrox, you analyze your own tank and log it in a book. There is a multi-leveled camera table with plugs for charging strobes and low pressure air for drying. The captain (Piers) and crew (Bruno, Christopher, David, Lyndon, Lourdes, and Guerlain) were helpful and friendly. I was impressed with the quality of the food. We had various types of fish, chicken, and even steaks on the grill one evening. We saw reef sharks on every dive except the first one (Provo). Eagle rays were spotted off the wall at about 100-foot depth on every morning dive. While in West Caicos, a manta ray was spotted breaking the surface off the stern. One of the crew spotted three pilot whales. Two crew members hopped in the zodiac and tried to circle around in front of the whales for some video but they dove and disappeared. It was still pretty awesome seeing them swim on the surface! French Cay also sports huge barrel sponges and gorgonians, turtles, grey angels, French angels, queen angels, schools of jacks, etc. On night dives I saw shrimp, long horned nudibranchs, and several cooperative (or dumb) honeycombed cowfish. The weather was awesome with highs in the upper 80s and water 82 to 84 degrees. There were some waves in

French Cay, so we would anchor on the leeward side at night. Friday evening we had a cocktail party on the boat before heading out to a local restaurant (The Terrace) for the only meal not included in our package. It is amazing how close you feel to the others on the boat by the end of the week. Nitrox was \$100 for the week and E-6 processing was \$10/roll. Live-aboards are great for divers traveling alone! Three-tiered camera table with two low pressure air nozzles. Crew hands you your rig once you are in the water and are waiting to take it when you surface. (www.aggressor.com/tca_home.html)

Aggressor, September 2003, Janet Czapski (trade-info@divetravelservices.com), Farmington Hills, MI. Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, surge. Hurricane Isabel was threatening at the beginning of the trip. Captain Piers was extremely safety conscious and did not depart the marina until Sunday morning when he was convinced the hurricane had detoured sufficiently to allow a safe trip. Our diving conditions were affected by the proximity of the hurricane effect; visibility was diminished, currents were up and our choices of safe diving sites was more limited. However, we spent a significant amount of time at French Cay diving with the sharks on every dive so the ambient lighting and close-up opportunities as part of the photo course were fantastic! Macro was in somewhat short supply at the dive sites we visited and the sites that provided more macro were in areas that were

more significantly affected by the hurricane so we were unable to get to them. The crew did a fabulous job of coordinating the needs of the photo students as well as providing safe diving conditions, wonderful accommodations on a new vessel great food. The nightly slide show provided by the photo students were fabulous! I'd do the photo course again in a minute and would love to do another trip on the same boat without the intensity of the photo course! This was a Mauricio Handler Photo course — it was very well done. This is the first time digital SLRs were included in the course so there were 2 of us using Nikon D100s as well as Mauricio. It was a learning experience for us but the course specifics were excellent for both film digital users and we were able to learn from each other as well as from Mauricio. The camera table setup was a little crowded but we were an equipment intensive group! The photo pro was extremely busy with 2-hour E-6 turnaround for the course, but performed wonderfully!

Wind Dancer, April 2003, Ralph Baker, Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 77 to 80 F, calm. The weather was calm. The wind made it chilly when you came out of the water. The water temperature required a 2 to 3mm wetsuit. The walls start at 35 feet or deeper. Diving Nitrox will greatly increase your time at depth. I spent much longer at 60 to 80 feet and had to sit out two dives one day. My computer had me within seven minutes of decompression. The corals and

most of the fish are on the walls. Behind the walls are sand flats that go from 25 feet to 12 feet or less. Most of the fish activity and corals are on the walls. The sand flats have the stingrays, flying gurnards, blennies, and smaller eel species. At Salt Cay there were dozens of box jelly fish in the water for the night dive. You need an exposure suit and use your regulator to blow bubbles to the surface when you ascend. They fish the reefs so you probably won't see really big "meat fish." You will see Nassau grouper, lots of different parrot fish, coneys, spotted morays, snapper (an exception to large fish was a huge snapper at the Airplane on South Caicos), hog fish, French grunts, gray grunts, and lots of giant barracuda. The barracuda had an unnerving habit of approaching you if you swam directly in front of them. One actually accelerated directly at me. I held out my camera thinking it was attacking me! Instead it passed less than 12 inches from my head, went around me, and chased another barracuda that was behind me. The best dive site was Eagle's Nest at South Caicos Isl. If you do the first dives in the morning you have the best chance of seeing the eagle rays in squadrons. Swim up behind the wall onto the sand hills. The eagle rays come through in the morning. I got close to four in one group. They will also appear on the walls. When they swim off, do not think they are "gone." Wait. In about two to three minutes they will usually return. Also if you can be the first diver to get to the sand chute with the three pinnacles or bommies, you may

see the gray reef sharks that hang out there. They leave when the first diver appears. They are about 6 feet long. The Library on Grand Turk is also a great dive! Although I saw many turtles, the biggest was at the Kelly's Folly on Salt Cay. The shell was about 5 feet long. The turtles will let you get fairly close for some good video. We dove the Endymion wreck. It is exposed to the open ocean. Many cannons, cannon balls, large chain, and many anchors are still visible. There is a lot of current. There is also a lot of fire coral. *Wind Dancer* is an older boat. The dive platform was a concrete pad. It had weathered and was rough. Some complained of it hurting their bare feet. There was also a rubber matting on the sun deck that hurt everyone's feet. My room was number 9 next to the engine room. The smell of diesel fuel was very noticeable. The crew was safety conscious. We even had a life jacket drill. The boat and crew did not concentrate on the south Caicos and Turk area, rather they did many different itineraries. They did the humpback whale trips, a Bahamas trip, and the boat evidently will end up in Tobago. Because of this the divemasters were not familiar with the dive sites. They could not answer questions regarding fish life or where to find a particular fish you were looking for. Overall the diving and service was fabulous. Sky King airlines will charge you for exceeding the weight limit. Mine was \$15 and \$20. U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere. On Grand Turk on Good Friday, everything was closed. The people that were staying on the island

that day only had a banana and some peanuts. Even the hotel kitchen was closed. (www.peterhughes.com)

UNITED STATES - FLORIDA

Dry Tortugas

Ultimate Getaway, June 2003, Glenn Gracom, New Smyrna Beach, FL.

Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F. Experience: 410 dives. Seventh time on boat for me. Great diving and plenty of it. Did 19 dives in three days. Nitrox available. Three delicious hot meals per day. Saw extremely interesting Fort Jefferson. Accommodations are not fancy but adequate. Dive from sunup to sundown. Spear fishing allowed, and it is very good. Must plan your dive so that you get back to anchored boat. Don't like to pick divers up in inflatable. (<http://ultimategetaway.net>)

UNITED STATES - TEXAS

Flower Garden Banks

MV Fling, May 2003, John Hluboky (john@hluboky.com), San Jose, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 69 to 76 F, calm, currents, no currents. The Flower Gardens *M/V Fling* and *M/V Spree* charters leave from Free Port, TX. This is a live-aboard charter which has some extended trips, but mostly weekend runs. For the weekend runs, there are up to five dives the first day (first dive at about 7am, last at about 9pm), and usually two the second. Dive conditions vary. In the spring, hammerheads are common, and late summer has