

Bragg Bahamas Trip August 2014

We were booked for a week aboard the Nassau-based live-aboard dive boat *Aqua Cat* starting Saturday, August 10 at 6pm. Due to flight schedules (flew from Denver to Miami then Miami to Nassau), we arrived the day before and checked into the Paradise Island Comfort Suites. Just out the back door of the Comfort Suites is the mammoth *Atlantis* resort, an underwater-themed property. With thousands of room options, a huge waterpark, a casino, a shopping center, a marina, multiple restaurants and more it is perfect for hanging out with thousands of your closest friends if you are so inclined – we weren't! We did enjoy viewing the many luxury mega-yachts moored in the marina – oh, to have the many,



Atlantis Resort

many spare millions needed to afford one of these floating palaces! We did have dinner at one of Atlantis' restaurants, a bbq place where we shared a salad of enormous proportions ... living large, a definite theme of the Atlantis!



Steve with our dinner salad!

On Saturday morning we spent some time walking through the Atlantis' "AquaAdventure" water park (we got free day passes as part of our night's stay at the Comfort Suites, otherwise we would have had to pay over \$100 per person). We then hung around the Comfort Suites pool until it was time to head to the *Aqua Cat*, a very short cab ride to its mooring at *Hurricane Hole Marina* on Paradise Island.



Aqua Cat

The *Aqua Cat* is a 102' long, 35' wide catamaran built in 2001 specifically as a live-aboard dive boat. It can accommodate up to 30 passengers; we had a total of 27 for our week: 15 from the US, 5 from Canada, 4 from France, and 3 from Brazil. We ranged in age from 12 to mid 70's. Steve and I quickly settled into our very spacious cabin with a king size bed and 3-piece bathroom. It was by far the largest cabin we have had to date on a live-aboard.

We had a crew of 10 (captain, asst captain, engineer, chef, sous chef, house-mouse, lead divemaster, videographer divemaster, photography divemaster, and boutique divemaster) who came from around the world: South Africa, France, U.K. and the US. They catered to our every need and desire. The only problem encountered was at the very end of the week when the carbonated drink system failed and despite the engineer's best efforts we had to go without diet coke for the day – can you imagine the endured trauma!

Saturday night we stayed in port in Nassau and enjoyed the first of many delicious meals. Chef Kirk believed in quality, quantity, and diversity. His cuisine during the week ran the gamut in types of ethnic foods (American, Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, American, etc.) as well as formality of foods (finger foods to sandwiches to rack of lamb). The *Aqua Cat* got underway about 5am Sunday while we were still snuggled in our beds.

After breakfast and a dive briefing, we jumped into the turquoise blue of the Atlantic for our first dive of the trip, a shallow check-out dive at *Lobster – No Lobster*. This was our second dive trip to the Atlantic Ocean; we previously had dived the Turks and Caicos Islands.

While doing the onboard surface interval after the first dive, we had our first unexpected bit of “excitement” of the trip ... the captain announced that 4 divers from another live-aboard, the *Carib Dancer*, were “missing” and we would be joining in the search for them so subsequent diving was being postponed. Fortunately, after a couple of hours we located the 4 missing divers. They were 2 groups of 2 Russians who ended up spending nearly 4 hours in the water -- less than 1 hour actually diving, the rest was spent floating on the surface – they were found a few miles away from where their boat was moored/where they started their dive. As they didn’t speak much English we didn’t hear what actually happened but the speculation was that they didn’t hear/understand their dive briefing and they ended up in an area of strong current that swept them significantly away from their boat. When we spotted them, they did have their bright red “safety sausages” inflated (Steve and I always carry these as well though not all divers do). One of our fellow passengers speaks a little Russian so she helped once they were brought on-board ... she asked if they had been scared and one of them said “No, terrified.” After getting them rehydrated with Gatorade and working to relieve the severe leg cramp of one of the divers, our crew transferred them back to their boat. We don’t know if they did anymore diving or not.



The Bahamas are in the Atlantic Ocean

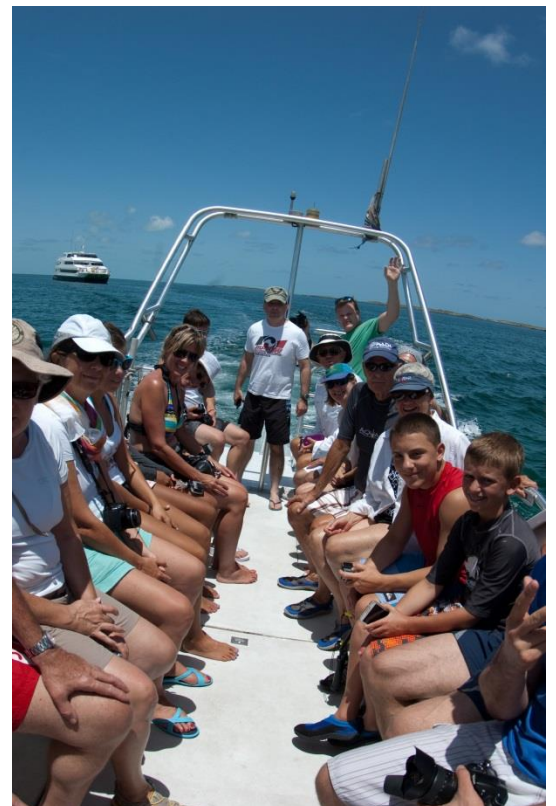


Dive Safety Sausage



Bahamian Rock Iguana

After lunch we had the opportunity to visit a small cay where the endangered Bahamian Rock Iguana lives. I joined several others for a short boat ride aboard the “Sea Dog” (the Aqua Cat’s skiff) to view these very prehistoric looking creatures and feed them some grapes (a grape was placed on a stick; hand feeding is not encouraged). The iguanas were happy to find food so easily. I was happy to return to the air-conditioned Aqua Cat as the temperature and high humidity on the land quickly became uncomfortable.



Aboard the 'Sea Dog'

The iguana visit was followed by a dive on *Jewfish Wall*. We finished out the afternoon of diving with a well-known Bahamian dive called “The Washing Machine.” Why, you ask? The answer is that you feel like you are being agitated throughout the dive, and with very little control over your motion during the dive, often tumbling head over fins! One of our dive masters said of our Washing Machine dive that it was the strongest current he had ever felt and it certainly was quite an exhilarating experience. The extra strong current may have been an effect of the “SuperMoon” experienced the day before on August 10 (a SuperMoon only happens once or twice a year and occurs during a full moon when the moon’s orbit brings it closer to the Earth than other full moons). At one point I went zipping right over a stingray resting on the sand, I’m not sure who was more startled!

We quickly became attuned to the regular schedule of life aboard the Aqua Cat:

8am Breakfast
9am 1st Dive
Snack/Surface Interval
11:15am 2nd Dive
12:30pm Lunch
2:30pm 3rd Dive
Snack//Surface Interval
4:45pm 4th Dive
6:30pm Dinner
8:30 Night/5th Dive

Here’s Steve enjoying one of his surface intervals ... and no, he hadn’t actually been drinking the rum. The rule on board is once you have any alcohol, you’re done diving for the day.



Steve during a surface interval

We dove on a variety of sites: shallow reefs, sandy spots with scattered coral heads, deeper walls, caves, etc. Specific sites included *Dog Rocks Wall*, *Fire Coral Reef*, *Parrot Fish Reef*, *Jake’s Drop-off*, *Rocky Dundas Caves*, *Three Peaks*, *Danger Reef*, *Hammerhead Gulch* (no hammerheads spotted), *Flat Rock Reef*, *Crab Mountain*, *Whale Shark Wall* (didn’t spot any Whale Sharks either), *Madison Avenue*, *Barracuda Shoals*, *Blue Hole*, *Periwinkle Reef* (had some beautiful periwinkle-colored coral). We also dove on the wreck of the *Austin Smith* where we did a shark feeding –



Steve and Melissa with shark feeding frenzy behind them

one of the divemasters brought down a frozen block of fish and the sharks enjoyed some goodies while we watched the show.





Melissa with swimming pig

The pigs will swim out to get the offered food – quite the sight – they don't like to get their ears wet! Once the food supply is exhausted, they return to the beach for a well-deserved post-snack nap.

Following the pig encounter, the Sea Dog headed for the "Thunderball Grotto" – featured in the James Bond films *Thunderball* and *Never Say Never Again*. The plan was to snorkel into and out of the grotto. However, the SuperMoon effect caused a very high tide which resulted in both openings to the grotto being totally underwater and with a strong current involved. Those who wished to, could visit the grotto but were strongly cautioned that the "swim in" was 6' to 8' in length and the "swim out" was 10' to 12' in length and the rocks overhead both swim-thru's were VERY sharp. Steve and I took the conservative approach and didn't visit the grotto; others in the group did and the result in one case resulted in the second bit of unexpected "excitement" on the trip. One of the Frenchmen ended up hitting his head on the exit swim-thru and took quite a chunk out of the very top of his head in addition to getting a laceration on his forehead. His head was bleeding quite profusely by the time he returned to the Sea Dog. The crew quickly applied pressure and we returned to the Aqua Cat post haste. Luckily one of our fellow guests is a thoracic surgeon so a medical clinic was "established" on the sun deck and the head wound was properly and promptly cleaned and stitched up. The gentleman took the rest of the day off from diving but he was back at it the next morning!

We also had the opportunity for another, very unique type of "feed and swim" experience during the trip. Wednesday morning the group loaded ourselves into the "Sea Dog" skiff and we headed to a small cay to "swim with the pigs" and feed them apple/pear slices!

Apparently the pigs were left on the cay after a failed farm situation and have continued to survive there on their own – well, with a little help from passing boats with tourists! There are a couple of mud holes that provide them fresh water. Last year several piglets were born, so the pig population now numbers over 20.



Steve and Melissa with exhausted, post-swimming pigs

The Bahamas are made up of over 700 islands and 2400 cays. The great thing about diving from a live-aboard is their ability to cover a lot of territory over the trip period. While we started and ended on the island of Nassau, we were able to dive all along the string to islands/cays known as the Exumas.



One difference I made this trip was to dive exclusively with a smaller 60 liter tank (standard size is 80 liters). The smaller size is much more manageable for me (i.e., lighter). Also, with the smaller tank, Steve and I are better matched in terms of dive timing – we both end up with about the same amount of remaining air at the same time and thus have more compatible dive times (using the larger tank I always had lots of air left when Steve was ready to end a dive).

Our overall impression of diving in the Bahamas is that there is a healthy soft coral population but we both thought the quantity and diversity of fish species was probably the most limited of any place we have dived to-date. We did enjoy the very nice warm water (mid-80's+) but those nice warm conditions also resulted in a lot of algae growth in the water which definitely negatively impacted visibility. Steve focused his photography this trip on reef creatures rather than fish and he got some great shots of some pretty small creatures – in fact he won the “best photo” contest so he’s in the running for a possible “free” trip drawing at the end of the year! I played around with the Go Pro video camera – Steve is in the process of reviewing them and hopefully creating a trip video from them.



Melissa enjoying the underwater sights

Above the water line, we were treated to a couple of very clear night skies and really enjoyed seeing the Milky Way with its haze of stars overhead.

We're glad we had the opportunity to dive the Bahamas and enjoy some of its special adventures (e.g., swimming with the pigs) – a week aboard the Aqua Cat was a great way to do it!



Steve giant striding off the Aqua Cat