

BAHAMA ADVENTURE

ON THE

NEKTON PILOT

JULY, 2000

We took the Bahama Adventure cruise on the Nekton Pilot in July of 2000. This was our first live-aboard, and we had a great time. The Nekton Pilot is a twin-hull SWATH vessel that is specifically designed to limit the boat's tossing and thereby provide a smoother ride than a conventional single-hull boat. It looks more or less like a huge pontoon boat. The cruise we took is one of several itineraries offered on the Nekton, and it covered dive sites including Grand Bahamas, the Cat Cay Islands and Bimini.

We flew from Atlanta to Ft. Lauderdale on Saturday afternoon, and the Nekton's van picked us up from the airport and dropped us at a nice Riverfront mall area for a few hours before taking us to the boat around 8 p.m. There we enjoyed a welcome reception where we met everyone, followed by a general briefing for the week. Our cruise carried about 30 divers and 10 crew, and we got to know everyone fairly well over the course of the week.

The boat's typical daily schedule was breakfast at 7:00; morning briefing at 8:00; diving until 11:45; lunch at 12:00; afternoon briefing at 1:00; diving until 5:45; dinner at 6:00; slide presentation at 7:00; night diving at 8:00.

This trip was the first time we dove by ourselves without a divemaster leading us. It was really great once we got used to it, and now we wonder if we would ever enjoy "follow the leader" diving in groups again.

The diving on this trip was good. Dive sites included a sampling of wrecks, reefs and semi-walls. We really enjoyed some of the sites, but others were not particularly impressive. Kim's favorites included Theo's Wreck, the Sugar Wreck, Rocky Mountain High, Tuna Alley and The Strip. Darren's favorites were Theo's Wreck, Tuna Alley and Rocky Mountain High.

Overall, the weather was very nice for the majority of the trip. The only days with overcast skies and/or rain were Sunday and Monday, but it cleared some on both days. We only had significant surge at one site (Sugar Wreck) and strong current at one site (Thumbnail). Visibility was usually good though we had some murky water at several sites .

We saw many common reef fish at most sites: parrotfish, angelfish, butterflyfish, grunts, snappers, trunkfish, triggerfish, squirrelfish. Barracudas joined us on virtually every dive, but we found eels at only 3-4 sites. Darren saw nurse sharks at 2 sites, but Kim saw only one. We saw painted tunicates and Christmas Tree worms for the first time as well as several new types of coral (especially white telesto), but found anemones at only about 2 sites, which disappointed Kim. Other interesting sightings included a juvenile gray angelfish, scrawled filefish, pufferfish, loggerhead and green turtles, drums, trumpetfish and large scorpionfish.

The Nekton staff was great. Captain Ephey and Steve piloted the boat and visited with the guests when possible. Mike (a.k.a. “Mikey Mike” to “Debbie Kim”) ran the daily dive operation assisted by Nicole, Stacie, Todd and “Mikey C.” These guys conducted the briefings, helped with gear, filled tanks between dives, handled cameras, and served as our “bubble-watchers.” Thanks to them, we all enjoyed safe hassle-free diving.

The boat’s engineer was “Big Mike,” whose real claim to fame was being married to the chef, Pam. Pam did a super job keeping us all fed with plentiful, tasty meals and lots of snacks.

Tracy was our purser for the week – she normally worked in the Ft. Lauderdale office, but was onboard for this trip helping out in the kitchen and doing housekeeping. She was always friendly and fun.

All of the crew members were helpful and responsive to the guests’ needs. They worked together very well and all aspects of the operation ran smoothly and efficiently.

Over the course of the week we got to see some special crew talent. On Thursday night we enjoyed a good magic show by Mikey C. rather than our usual informational slide show. Mikey Mike proved to be a good videographer, and we purchased the trip video he produced.

The atmosphere on the Nekton Pilot was informal and fun, and we really enjoyed getting to know many of the other guests and the crew. We spent a good bit of time with Mark and Twylla from Kansas and with Bob and his daughter Becky from New Mexico. The comic of the trip was definitely Doug – he was always handy with a pun, and his wife Judie was fun, too – they were from Arizona. There were a number of guys on the trip alone, including Luke from Huntsville, Alabama; Sidney from Germany; and Michael, Steve, Stewart and Gary from New York/New England. Al and Judy, Ed and Nance, and Steve all came from Virginia.

We found that most of the people on this trip had been diving for a long time and quite a few were repeat Nekton guests. Many of them had been diving at sites all around the world, and we asked lots of questions about their experiences. A number of people really liked Bonaire and highlighted the ease of shore diving there. Several had visited sites in the Pacific (Fiji; Paupau, New Guinea; the Great Barrier Reef) and raved about these places. Those who had been to Belize enjoyed it very much, too. We heard mixed reviews of the Cay Sal Bank Nekton trip, but favorable reports on the Southern Bahamas and Belize itineraries.

It was great getting to know everyone.

Sunday was our first dive day aboard the Nekton Pilot. Overnight, we had traveled from Ft. Lauderdale to Grand Bahama. In the morning, Cpt. Ephey met with customs officials to get us cleared for our visit. We had turned in our passports and filled out customs forms on Saturday night to help expedite the process. The morning started out somewhat dreary with rain and overcast skies. At breakfast, we saw two waterspouts rising from the ocean to the clouds – they looked like thin white tornadoes hovering over the water.

We spend the entire day at Indian Cay Reef. This site consisted of a large number of relatively small coral heads spread out over the sand at about 60 feet. We saw lots of life here, including several species of angelfish, parrotfish and other typical reef fish as well as barracuda and a spotted eel. We also saw some pretty indigo hamlets for the first time.

We only got one morning dive in because of the time spent clearing customs. The sky was overcast we didn't see a lot of color, and it was raining when we came up from the dive. The two afternoon dives were much nicer with sunnier skies so the colors were much more vivid. The night dive here was really nice – one of the best of the entire trip. We saw the largest crab we have ever encountered as well as two hermit crabs knocking into each other (either fighting or trying to mate, we guessed).

Monday again started out overcast and rainy as we looked for dolphins along the White Sand Ridge – a bank south of Grand Bahama. Unfortunately, we spotted only two dolphins so the dolphin snorkel was cancelled. We learned that there was a dolphin research boat close by that was sending out underwater signals and affecting the dolphins' behavior.

We then moved to a site known as Scoto's Reef where we had a very nice dive, although the sky was overcast. There were a number of cuts through the reef, and it reminded us of the East End of Grand Cayman. The camera batteries died here, so we have no photos from this dive.

For the afternoon and evening dives, we moved on to the Sugar Wreck – a small 100-year-old freighter in several large pieces lying in about 20 feet of water. The surge was very strong here so there was some debris floating in the water, but this was still one of Kim's favorite sites. There was an incredible amount of life here, including schools of yellow grunts and snappers and numerous other reef fish, and there were lots of pretty purple sea fans. We also spotted two small eels – a spotted moray and what looked like a goldentail.

The night dive here was really nice. We saw one green sea turtle swimming above us that made beautiful silhouette as well as two loggerheads. We also saw a number of large porcupine fish swimming about.

On Tuesday morning we dove Theo's Wreck – a freighter intentionally sunk off Grand Bahama about 25 years ago. The sky was sunny and the water was clear. This was a great dive because the boat was still intact, lying on its side in about 110 feet of water. There were a fair number of fish and an abundant growth of sponges and coral all over the structure. We spotted the most tremendous parrotfish we had ever seen here.

The only drawback to this site was diving this deep twice in one morning. Kim's computer hit the red zone on the deco gauge on the second dive, but we came up in a controlled ascent and brought the level down.

In the afternoon we dove Shark Junction – an area where other dive operators feed reef sharks several times per day. This site was fairly murky with a number of coral heads spread over the sand. We didn't see any sharks here, and neither did many of the other divers. In all fairness, we never found the area where the sharks were most likely to appear, though several in our group who were better navigators did see two or three sharks. In fact, it was here that we got our first tow back to the boat. We surfaced a fair distance from the Nekton and were swimming back on the surface when Steve came by in the shore shuttle tender and towed us in.

The night dive here was not particularly impressive.

Wednesday morning we enjoyed great diving under sunny skies at Rocky Mountain High – a site located on a bank south of Grand Bahama known as Gingerbread Grounds. The dives were beautiful with lots of life. The water here was greenish and somewhat murky around the reefs but clearer on the top. This was one of our favorite sites because of the immense amount of life. We saw painted tunicates and anemones here as well as an abundance of white telesto coral. In one cut through the reef, there were colonies of the white telesto branching out from practically every spot on the walls – beautiful.

During lunch we started our 3-plus hour run to the Hesperus, a very small barge sunk in shallow water, where we completed our afternoon and night dives. Darren saw a shark on the afternoon dive and there were a number of large remoras hanging around. The night dive featured quite a few loggerhead turtles as well as both yellow and southern stingrays, and we dove in two groups to avoid overcrowding. Even so, there were far too many people in the water at once for such a small site; divers were running all over each other. Doug and Judie were “attacked” by a nurse shark after Doug swam up and flashed his strobe in the sleeping shark's eyes several times, and he had to fend off the shark with his light and camera. Judie was pretty spooked by the event, but Doug managed to get one good shot of the shark coming at him.

On Thursday our two dive sites were off the Cay Cay Islands under beautiful sunny skies. In the morning, we dove Victory Reef – a very nice reef with a lot of coral but not an overabundance of fish life. We saw a really large Nassau grouper hiding in a hole and a trunkfish that appeared to turn varying shades of lavender as we followed him. The most distinguishing feature of this site was the presence of purple sea plume coral all over the reef.

It was here that we experienced our second (and last) tow back to the boat. We knew we were far from the mooring pin and eventually decided to make our ascent and do our 15-foot safety stop where we were. We spotted the boat and went back under a few feet in order to swim back to it. In a few minutes we saw the shadow of the skiff above us – Nicole had seen us surface and come to rescue us. She told us that she thought we were headed to Cuba!

For our afternoon and night dives, we went to Tuna Alley. This was one of our absolute favorite sites of the trip. The visibility was outstanding and the water was very blue. There was a really neat pair of swim-throughs that went down to about 80 feet with some dramatic openings to the surface. We saw lots of fish and corals here – a really nice, pretty reef. The night dive here was not really remarkable with the exception of seeing our only octopus of the trip and a tiny (1”) juvenile drum.

Friday was our last dive day. Since we had an early afternoon flight home on Saturday, we were limited to two morning dives and only one afternoon dive. Our dive sites on Friday were both off the coast of Bimini. The water here was gorgeous – varying shades of turquoise and blues, reminiscent of the Kona coast of Hawaii.

The morning dive site was a wall starting at about 90+ feet called Thumbnail. Unfortunately, the “slight” current was very strong and we used half our air just getting to the mooring pin on the first dive, as did many others. We didn’t have much bottom time, and the wall wasn’t very impressive. We took the granny line out for the second dive and descended the mooring line to get more bottom time. One neat sighting here was a large school of silversides. We also spotted our only green moray eel of the trip here hiding under a coral head on the sandy flat.

Our last dive site was a small, relatively shallow reef called The Strip, and it was one of Kim’s favorites. We saw several spotted eels – two of whom were very cooperative for macro shots; a nurse shark resting on the bottom under an outcropping of rock; three large scorpionfish – one swimming through the water with his colorful fins extended; and several large crabs – one sitting out in the open. A super ending to a very nice, relaxing dive trip.

SUNDAY, 7-2-00

INDIAN CAY REEF (GRAND BAHAMA)

10:30 a.m. 82°F 45 min. 60 ft. (estimated)

Overcast sky/rain. Numerous small coral heads on sandy bottom.

1:30 p.m. 82°F 45 min. 60 ft. (estimated)

Sunnier; nice dive. Various reef fish/corals/sponges.

3:45 p.m. 82°F 44 min. 60 ft.

Nice dive with sunny skies.

8:00 p.m. 78°F 58 min. 49 ft.

Huge king crab, two hermit crabs.

MONDAY, 7-3-00

SCOTO'S REEF (GRAND BAHAMA)

11:00 a.m. 81°F 34 min. 86 ft.

Very nice dive on long reef with lots of cuts and an abundance of life. Reminiscent of Grand Cayman's East End.

SUGAR WRECK (GRAND BAHAMA)

3:30 p.m. 78°F 61 min. 19 ft.

Pieces of 100-year old freighter scattered over the sand in several main large sections. Very strong surge and somewhat overcast. Lots of yellow and French grunts; common purple sea fans; two small eels.

8:00 p.m. 76°F 64 min. 22 ft.

Great night dive. Green sea turtle and 2 huge loggerhead turtles; lots of pufferfish; several lobsters. Surge still very strong.

TUESDAY, 7-4-00

THEO'S WRECK (GRAND BAHAMA)

8:15 a.m. 82°F 29 min. 103 ft.

Super wreck dive on intact freighter. Lots of growth on structure. Huge parrotfish, juvenile drum.

10:45 a.m. 83°F 36 min. 102 ft.

Nice dive – explored interior of hold.

SHARK JUNCTION (GRAND BAHAMA)

4:00 p.m. 84°F 41 min. 67 ft.

Lots of small coral heads – fairly murky water – no sharks spotted.

8:00 p.m. 79°F 30 min. 82 ft.

Okay night dive – spotted eel; arrowline crab.

WEDNESDAY, 7-5-00

ROCKY MTN. HIGH (GINGERBREAD GROUNDS)

8:15 a.m. 82°F 49 min. 49 ft.

Great diving on two small elongated reefs; nice swimthroughs. Greenish water with fairly low viz around reefs but nice on top. White telesto coral; painted tunicates; scrawled filefish; anemones; juvenile angelfish.

10:30 a.m. 80°F 52 min. 49 ft.

WRECK OF THE HESPERUS

3:45 p.m. 86°F 50 min. 17 ft.

Small concrete barge. Schooling barracuda & snappers; large remoras.

9:15 p.m. 80°F 34 min. 20 ft.

Many (6-8) loggerhead turtles; yellow & southern stingrays.

THURSDAY, 7-6-00

VICTORY REEF (CAT CAYS)

8:15 a.m. 84°F 48 min. 70 ft.

Clear blue water; abundant purple sea plumes; various reef fish, etc

10:15 a.m. 83°F 35 min. 83 ft.

TUNA ALLEY (CAT CAYS)

1:15 p.m. 84°F 39 min. 76 ft.

Great dive with super viz in crystal blue water. Lots of life; swim-thrus.

3:45 p.m. 84°F 41 min. 61 ft.

8:00 p.m. 80°F 36 min. 71 ft.

Octopus; tiny juvenile drum.

FRIDAY, 7-7-00

THUMBNAIL (BIMINI)

8:15 a.m. 83°F 26 min. 90 ft.

Very strong current – short, difficult dive. Not a very attractive site on top. Large schools of silversides; green moray eel; more life and small critters on wall.

10:30 a.m. 83°F 23 min. 94 ft.

THE STRIP (BIMINI)

2:45 p.m. 85°F 49 min. 43 ft.

Great dive on small reef. Nurse shark; 3 spotted eels, several large scorpionfish; large crab; banded coral shrimp.