



# Carib Dancer

I had descended to the bottom in 60 feet of water just off the wall on **Black Tip Reef**, following Capt. Dennis Gautreau of the *Carib Dancer*. Conditions could not have been any better, no current and over 100 feet of visibility. He made a straight swim to the blue abyss directly in front of me, paused, then dropped over the lip, temporarily disappearing from view. As I dropped over the top of the wall behind him, I saw why he had made such a quick maneuver; an enormous eagle ray passed between a pinnacle and the wall, less than 25 feet from both of us. It was inquisitive at first, but with the sound of more approaching divers, it gracefully ascended

over the wall away from oncoming commotion.

Captain Dennis then made a turn towards the open ocean. I didn't see anything out in front of him but the deep rich blue of the open ocean. I followed along as the last time I had separated from the wall, I was rewarded with an encounter with a juvenile humpback whale. After following for about 50 feet, Captain Dennis stopped, paused and looked back toward the wall. After about 90 seconds of hovering 85 feet under water, he slowly made his way back to the wall, gave me a wave and headed back towards the boat.

When back on board, I asked him about the swim into open ocean. "I like to take a minute to appreciate the sheer size, the enormity of these walls. It helps to put things into perspective". He said.

What Captain Dennis missed was an incredible sight. I slipped along one of the groves running perpendicular to the wall and was swimming towards the mooring line when I noticed something. Two lionfish, both sporting unusually dark coloration were facing each other, with a third a few feet away. Completely oblivious to my presence, these two lionfish then attacked each other. Going cheek to cheek,

they began battling for what I assume was the affection of (and possibly a night of indiscretion with) the third one. The two combatants went at it for several minutes, wrestling check to check, swimming in a tight circle with pectoral spines outstretched. They stopped for a brief moment, then closed in and went at it again. I moved in closer for a better picture as this battle had stirred up the bottom quite a bit. Finally, without warning, one of the two gave up and shot away missing my cheek by inches.

This dive was one of many memorable experiences diving in the Exumas aboard the *Carib Dancer*.



## History of the Exumas

Exuma is a district in the middle of the Bahamas consisting of over 360 islands. The entire chain is 130 miles long starting southeast of New Providence. Lucayan Indians were the first to establish colonies and survived by fishing and farming. They were descendants of The Bahamas' first inhabitants, the Adreans, who travelled by boats from the Mosquito Coast region of Africa. The Spanish arrived in the 1500s and turned the island into a salt mining colony. Pirates also used the islands' many cays and hidden coves as bases from which to conduct raids and hide stolen booty.

The Exumas were settled in the 1780s by American loyalists that left to seek refuge from American Revolutionary War. George Town, the capital of the district, was named in honor of King George III, to whom the settlers maintained their loyalty. John Rolle, a Loyalist settler of the Exumas, is a major figure in the islands' heritage. Upon his death in 1842, he bestowed all of his significant Exuma land holdings to his slaves. As a result, a number of towns on Great Exuma have been named after him. In fact, 60% of the island's natives still have the surname Rolle.

More recently, the islands have provided the backdrop for such movies as *Pirates of the Caribbean* & *Thunderball*.

## Exumas Land and Sea Park

The sites located within Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park are the highlights of the trip. Established in 1959 and overseen by the Bahamas National Trust, the park spans over 110,000 acres and holds the distinction of being the first land and sea preserve in the world. While overfishing had caused declines in the population of many game and commercial fish species in other areas of the Bahamas, the Exuma Land and Sea Park still had healthy populations. In 1985, the Bahamas National Trust declared the park as a protected replenishment zone. This area is a strictly enforced no-take zone, so the fish and sea creatures have lost most of their fear of man.

This couldn't have been more evident on the night dives, where enormous Caribbean spiny lobsters would walk up to you, and in one case, over you to get to where they were going. Nurse Sharks and black jacks would escort you, staying just beyond detection of your light until you shined it upon something they found interesting... or delicious.

In fact, there was a great barracuda on the appropriately named **Barracuda Shoals** site that displayed an obviously learned behavior. This five-footer hovered just beneath the *Carib Dancer*, hiding just beyond the range of its underwater



spotlights. It would slowly lower its head to where it was completely vertical in the water column. As the lights attracted smaller fish and yellow-tailed snappers towards the surface, this sea-smart predator would maneuver itself closer to its unsuspecting prey while still hiding in the blanket of darkness. It then exploded into the light after its prey. You could instantly tell a successful charge as smaller fish would swoop in to gulp down the morsels left behind. This behavior continued for over 30 minutes, before a snorkeler popped down to see if I was OK.

Everything inside the park is bigger and not very leery of divers. At **Amberjack Reef**, several reef sharks were already casually swimming under the boat as it pulled up to the mooring line. These sharks made very close passes, inspecting each buddy team as they made their way to the reef below. One came in so close that it bumped my camera strobes. Two enormous black groupers had stationed themselves on a coral head directly underneath the boat. Unphased by divers, these giants allowed divers to approach closely so long as they did so calmly. Move in too quickly for a photo and they would swim to a nearby coral head, then



return to their favorite spot a couple minutes later.

Sharks also made close, but very relaxed passes at **Danger Reef**. For years, Danger Reef was the location of a very popular shark feeding dive. The feedings have stopped but the sharks still remain. The site itself boasts very impressive coral heads that rise as high as 20 feet off of the sandy bottom. Just ahead of the mooring line on the sandy bottom at 70 feet deep, a rarely seen pirate blenny repeatedly popped out of its hole, flicked its pronounced pectoral fin, then disappeared.

“Don’t touch the steering wheel on the submerged jeep on **Jeep Reef**. It is covered with fire coral”, said divemaster Craig. “Where we moor, most people don’t actually find it though”, he continued. The wind and tides must have been perfect that day. As soon as we entered and began to descend, the jeep was just off to our right in about 35 feet of water. Shallow water, great visibility, interesting

subject and Carib Dancer in the background; what an awesome wide-angle photo opportunity! Jeep Reef itself is on top of a coral mound rising about seven feet off of the sandy bottom. The tides played a role here as the current shifted mid-dive. We ended up having to swim against the current both leaving and returning to the boat.

**Cracked Coral Reef** offered something for everyone. Just north of the mooring line was an impressive brain coral colony over six feet wide. This high profile reef sloped slightly to 70 feet before hitting the wall. As the name implied, there were several impressive swimthroughs. One of which turned out to be a minnow cave. The highly compacted school moved in unison, creating a shimmering curtain swimming rapidly from one end of the swimthrough to the other as a pair of black jacks terrorized them seemingly just for the fun of it. Inching forward, I noticed a spot where the sun

was poking through a hole in the ceiling. I looked up and froze. Less than two feet over my head were seven lionfish. I guess it isn’t a secret what they were feeding on. I allowed the other two divers to safely pass, then carefully took notice of the location of each lionfish. There were so many silversides in the cave, I had to wave my strobe back and forth to gain a brief window of open water between the camera and the lionfish to attempt to take pictures.

Two sharks repeated buzzed divers on the wreck of the **Austin Smith**. Although they would make passes over the wreck, then disappear into the blue regularly, the main attraction here were all the little creatures. Living in a small hole on the top of the bow was a dark-headed blenny who seemed to enjoy looking at its reflection in my lens. He’d pop out, admire himself then disappear when the flash went off, only to appear again 10 seconds later.

## Not the Same Trip Twice

Due to its location, topography and the fact that the ocean conditions are constantly changing, determining which sites to dive depend on the tides. A site can be perfect, with great visibility and no current at noon only to become unsafe to dive by 2:30. Since tides don’t change on a perfect 12-hour cycle, and the strength of the tides vary depending on the locations of the sun and the moon, no two trips aboard the Carib Dancer are identical.

On this trip, **Hammerhead Gulch** was on the schedule. This was a shallow site with scattered coral heads that rose to within 10 feet of the surface from a maximum depth of around 30 feet. The first thing we noticed upon our descent was how loud the reef was. All the clicking, cracking, popping, scraping and crunching served as an announcement that there was a plethora of invertebrates, and that this site was a macro-photographers dream. Also,



the reef was alive with snappers, grunts and several Nassau groupers. The action wasn't confined to the reef itself, but also in the expansive grassy patch adjoining the site. Here, we discovered two tiny and rarely-seen swallowtail shield slugs with bright blue, orange and black stripes across their backs.

One exception to the "dive sites based on tides" rule was at **Flat Rock Reef**, which had a small barrier island to protect it from the currents. The reef itself was the submerged base of this island bottoming out at around 30 feet. As you made your way to either end of this small island, the current ripped faster than you could keep yourself in place. We staked out a spot where the current was manageable and ducked behind a coral head to see what would come swimming by. It wasn't long before a pair of large spotted eagle rays casually glided against the current in search of an easy lunch.

On the way back to Nassau, the *Carib Dancer* stopped at **Lost Blue Hole**. This is an ancient sink hole, almost perfectly circular, that bottoms out at around 180 feet. What's interesting about this site are the sharks. You catch it on the right week and it's quite a show. Once divers enter the hole, sharks swim up from the bottom, do what can only be described as a "funky twitch", swim around for a few minutes, then descend back to the bottom of the hole. There is a small cavern at about 70 feet, duck inside and wait for a diver,

shark, or one of several large remoras to fill the blue center of your photo framed by the sides of the cavern. If the shark action is slow, the remoras won't leave you alone. The nurse sharks and large sea turtle provided an exclamation point to a great week of diving.

## Non-Divers

Although there aren't any planned shore excursions, there are a couple of things to take note of:

- » You can sleep in. Also, when everyone else is diving, you have the entire boat (and crew) to yourself.
- » There are opportunities to fish when not inside the Exuma Land and Sea Park. You can also snorkel, read, enjoy a private movie, read a book, take a behind the scenes tour of the boat and relax away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.
- » Arrival and Departure days- The *Carib Dancer* is docked only a few minutes from the world renowned Atlantis Resort, as well as the Nassau Straw Market, high-end duty free shopping and the Nassau Hard Rock Cafe . Arrive early and leave late, you'll pack in the better half of two days in Nassau.

## About the Carib Dancer

Departing out of Nassau, Bahamas, The *Carib Dancer* is 100 feet long, and can take as many as 14 passengers with up to 6 crew members. It's draft is shallow enough that all dive sites are accessible from the main boat. If you've ever had to use the chase boats to get to and from dive sites, you already know how nice it is to be able to use the diving platform and ladders to enter and leave the water.

Contrary to reports appearing online, the Nitrox system is running fine and delivers consistent fills between 32.3 and 32.9%. The whip system deployed onboard also means that you only have to set up your scuba unit once. Simply remove your first stage when your unit is secured. When you come back for your next dive, the tank has already been refilled.

The price of the charter includes all juices, soft drinks, local beer & wine. If your preference is rum, vodka or some other spirits, you'll need to hit the duty free and bring a bottle on board with you. There is a liquor store across the street from the dock for those last-minute runs.

There is a quad cabin on board, which could work out to your advantage. In our case, there were only 12 divers on the boat that week. So there were only two of us sharing the quad cabin, which meant that we actually had more room than a traditional stateroom. By booking the quad cabin, you could save \$200 on your charter and have more comfortable accommodations. This is a roll of the dice however as you could be sharing the room with three other people.