

Aquacat “Trip Tips”



OK, first of all, take everything that I say here with a grain of salt (and maybe a slice of lime & shot of tequila). I am not in anyway trying to say that this is what you have to do, or that this is how things will play out, I am merely saying that this trip will be my 5th on the Aquacat, and this is what I have typically found in the past. It is also certainly not meant to replace or contradict anything that is on the Aquacat website.

What should I bring?

This is one of the biggest questions about going on a Live Aboard. Space is at a premium. Fashion is not. Obviously bring all the dive gear that you would on a normal dive trip. (This includes your C-Cards, Logbook, Passport & all applicable paperwork.) As for the “other stuff”, only bring the bare essentials. We will be on the boat from Saturday evening (around 6pm) until the following Friday night. You don't have to “dress for dinner”, so you won't need a lot of nice clothes. You will need comfortable clothes. Think in terms of a couple pairs of shorts, a few t-shirts and something to travel in. You will have the chance to do up to 5 dives a day, so having something dry is nice.

No matter what you ultimately decide on, you will probably find that you brought more than you need. As a side note, if you have room, the crew always appreciates if you have any books or DVDs that you no longer need (and are reasonably current) and are willing to leave them behind.

What should I expect?

Let's address this in stages.

Before I get to Nassau:

Be aware of luggage restrictions for the airline that you are flying on and pack accordingly. (It doesn't hurt to pack a “luggage scale” for the trip home.) As I mentioned above, you will likely need (and use) far less clothing than you think, so take that into account. Double check. Make sure that you have your C-Cards (including NITROX if you plan on diving NITROX on the trip), your log book, your passport and any other trip paper work. (Make sure that you check that your passport is valid & won't expire while we are gone.) As you are throwing your stuff in the car, check one last time that you have everything. Like with most international flights, at some point you will be given a Bahamas Custom Form and a Tourism Form. Fill these out before you land.

At the Nassau Airport

Once your plane lands in NAS, you will claim your luggage and you will have to clear Bahamian Customs and Immigration. This should be pretty easy assuming that you have not brought anything that you shouldn't bring into the country and that you filled out the paperwork on the plane. At the Immigration counter/booth you will need to hand them your Tourism Form and they will stamp it and return a part of it to you. **Do not lose this. You will need to give it back when you leave.** Once you are done inside the airport, its time to head to Paradise Island and the Aquacat. It is normally berthed at Hurricane Hole Marina. (If you arrive on the Friday and need to take a cab to your hotel, US Dollars should be fine to use since the Bahamian Dollar is tied to the US Dollar, but if you get change, expect it in Bahamian Dollars.) Note: If you arrive on Saturday, the Aquacat will normally arrange ground transport to the boat from the airport.

Once you get to Paradise Island:

The first thing to do as soon as you get to Paradise Island is to take a deep breath and relax. You are there. The Aquacat is berthed at the Hurricane Hole Marina, and you will be able to see the boat as you cross the bridge. (It will be just to the right of the bridge.) If you go to Google Maps and then switch to the Google Earth view, you can see the Aquacat (it isn't labelled on Google Earth). It is adjacent to the Green Parrot Bar & Grill.



You will likely be able to drop your gear off on the dive deck of the boat, but other than that, do not expect to gain access to the boat until around 6pm. At this point, you are on your own, but there are a few things within walking distance. The most obvious is that the Atlantis Resort is about a 10 minute walk. (BTW, for those so inclined, the Atlantis has a Casino.) On the way, to Atlantis, you will go past a number of shops & restaurants, but heads up, this is Paradise Island and paradise ain't cheap. Right by the Ferry Terminal is a Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville just in case you want a "Cheeseburger in Paradise". I haven't been there so I can't speak to it. As for me, I will likely just hang out at the Green Parrot. It isn't fancy (at all), but they have good burgers & fries and cold beer.

Once you get on the Aquacat:

Around 6pm (remember, this is now "Island Time"), someone from the crew will come out to the Green Parrot and let us know that we are free to board. Once on board, we will hang out on the dive deck, and get name tags, a spot on the dive deck and (most importantly) a Rum Punch. The crew will be quickly introduced and you will be assigned your rooms. A very quick Meet & Greet might be done at this point. After a few minutes, you will be asked to set up your BCD & Regs and to put the rest of your dive gear (mask, fins, snorkel etc) into your tupperware bin. This is where your dive gear will stay the rest of the week. You will take your stuff to your room and unpack and they will come by and collect your bags. Poof! Your luggage will disappear never to be seen for the rest of the week (so don't leave anything in it

that you will need. (And if you won't need it, then you probably shouldn't have brought it to begin with.) **Do not set-up, and leave your camera gear on the camera table**, because we will be staying tied up at our berth until just before sunrise. Keep it inside until after we have left the dock in the morning.

After you are settled, it will be time for the welcome BBQ. Eat up and mingle. This is a great time to get to know who you are travelling with & to renew old friendships. After the BBQ, the crew will have us get with them and they will want to see our C-Cards and our Log books. They will ask if there are any dive sites that you want to do (weather, current and conditions permitting). I personally have a few I love & that I want to do again, but more on that later. They will ask for a donation to the Bahamas Hyperbaric Chamber fund (I think it is about \$10 or so.) The final scheduled event for the evening will be a mandatory safety briefing that will explain recall procedures while diving, fire and evacuation procedures, areas that are out of bounds etc. After that, you are on your own for the rest of the night, just be back before we set sail just before sunrise.

As dawn approaches on Sunday morning, you might notice that the boat's engines will start and we will begin moving. The captain waits until just before dawn because there is a channel that we go through that he has to navigate visually, so he needs the sun to be up when we go through it.

Day-to-day Life on the Aquacat:

Life on the Aquacat is all about relaxing. When you get up in the morning, grab a coffee & before long, breakfast will be ready. This is also a good time to finalize setting up your gear and to get your camera out to the camera table.

A typical day will be some variation of this:

- Get up grab a coffee & breakfast
- Do a dive briefing
- Pool is open
- Grab a snack while the boat moves
- Do a dive briefing
- Pool is open
- Grab lunch and maybe a nap while the boat is moved
- Do a dive briefing
- Pool is open
- Grab a snack while the boat is moved
- Do a dive briefing
- Pool is open
- Grab Supper
- Do a quick dive briefing (the location for the night dive is usually the same spot as the 4th day dive)
- Pool is open (Night dive)
- Relax and call it a day
- Essentially, a typical day on a Live Aboard is, as one person once put it: Eat. Sleep. Dive. Repeat.

There is never any pressure to do any dive. If you want to nap, or catch some rays, or if the dive briefing makes you think that a given dive site might not be your cup of tea so to speak then sit it out. No worries.

As far as Live Aboards go, the Aquacat is one of the larger ones, however, you will be on a boat with about 20 other people, all of whom are on vacation plus the boat's crew. Nobody wants to hear someone complain constantly. Try to keep a positive outlook. That is not to say that if you have a legitimate problem, you should suffer in silence, of course not. Just be aware that personal space is at a premium and we are all there to have a good time.

The Aquacat will put a DM in the water for most if not all dives. If you want to follow the DM, then you can, but you are not obligated to follow them.

Expect that the first dive will be a check-out / refresher dive. This will be your first opportunity to double check your weights and to brush any rust off your skills and to once again become comfortable underwater. It may also be relatively close to Nassau depending on whether or not everyone's luggage made it. You will not be required to demonstrate any skills, but the crew knows that the Aquacat is a destination dive, so its guests may have gone a while since their last dive.

The last day (or so):

The routine starts to change on Thursday night. Normally, there will be no night dive on Thursday night, instead, there will be a small, light-hearted Awards Banquet. There will be a photo contest (The last time I was on, categories included: Macro, Wide Angle, Above the surface and video.) and prizes range from t-shirts to a free trip. (OK, to win the free trip, you have to have the best image of the week, and then it gets entered into the Best of the Year contest and if you win that then I think that gets you a trip.) Other highlights of the night include the crew recognizing anyone who hit a milestone on the trip, and viewing of the trip's DVD (that the crew shot).

Friday morning, we start heading back to Nassau, but not before we have the chance to get in two last dives (including one in "Sgt Major infested waters"). Then, rinse your gear and hang it out to dry. We typically pull into our berth in early afternoon. Friday night, supper is not provided, but there will be a wine and cheese party.

Saturday morning there will only be a continental breakfast, not a full breakfast and you will have to be off the boat by 9am. (Much like on the first Saturday when you got there, if you have to, we were allowed to leave everything on the dive deck and hang out until it is time to go to the airport.) Normally, the Aquacat will arrange ground transportation back to the airport.

At the Airport:

For anyone travelling back to the USA, after you check in with your airline, you will clear US Customs in Nassau. From that point on, your flight is, for all practical purposes, a domestic flight as far as you are concerned. (I will be heading back to Canada, and I will have to go through a different part of the airport.)

Random Thoughts and (Anticipating some) FAQs

What do I do with my dive gear?

On the first night, you will be assigned a spot on the dive deck. You will be asked if you are diving air or NITROX and they will put the appropriate colour cap (Black = air and Green = NITROX) on your tank. Once that happens, put your BCD on your tank & set it up the way you like it. Put your Reg on the tank, but do not hook it up. Put your mask, fins snorkel etc in the Tupperware/Rubber Maid tub under your seat. There are hangers to hang up your wetsuit. All of your gear stays there all week. Before a dive, you test your tank (if diving NITROX), put on your wetsuit, attach your 1st stage (double check the fill) get into your BCD and put on your fins & mask and then you are ready. After the dive, you sit down & get out of your BCD, and unhook your 1st stage from your tank. Put your gear in your tub, and get out of your wetsuit. There are showers on the dive deck to rinse off after your dive. Before you know it, the crew will hook up the refill whip and start refilling your tank.

What do they have for cameras?

If you have a camera, you will want a seat on the inside rows in front of the camera table. The camera table on the dive deck is a "designated dry area" (no drinks or liquids allowed). It is covered (in that sticky, non-slip kitchen drawer liner stuff) so that you are not putting your camera down on a hard steel tabletop. On the camera table is an air nozzle to blow the water off of your housing if you choose to use it. Also on the dive deck is a recharging shelf to recharge your batteries etc. (Packing a small power bar is not a bad idea.)

What is the food like?

Sorry, I can't answer that. There is a new chef since the last time I was on board. In general, Live Aboards tend to have really good (not necessarily fancy, but hearty) high quality food. You will have the opportunity to do up to 5 dives a day, and that is a lot of calories to replace. The food will be tasty and although it is buffet style, there is usually enough choice that you will find something that you like.

Can I drink?

Yes, there is a supply of beer, wine and Rum (I think) but after your first (alcoholic) drink, you are done diving for the day.

What are the rooms (cabins) like?

The rooms on the Aquacat are by far the biggest rooms of any Live Aboard I have ever been on. They are more like a really small hotel room. They have closets to hang anything that needs hanging. They have a small "bar fridge" although I have no idea why. The heads have a toilet that is pretty much like normal high efficiency one in a home. There is also a shower in each head.

Is water rationed?

I have never seen water get rationed on the Aquacat. They have a pretty robust fresh water generation capability and can support up to 22 guests showering after 5 dives/day. Having said that, they do ask that you not waste it.

Does the boat have a souvenir shop?

Sort of. At some point towards the end of the trip (Friday morning???) they will lay out a selection of t-shirts, coffee mugs and other items for purchase. If you need something like toothpaste or batteries prior to then, there is a chance that they might be able to help you out. There will also be one crew member who will video tape the trip & a DVD will be available at the end of the trip.

I mentioned earlier that there were some dive sites that I really want to do again. What are they?

Split Coral Head: Pretty safe bet that they will do this dive site. It is often where they do the "Shark Dive". It has a shallow sandy flat area with a huge coral head sticking up. This has thousands of Christmas Tree Worms and Feather Dusters on it. The site also has a sheer wall into the abyss and a healthy population of Reef Sharks.

The Washing Machine: A really fun drift dive where you have to ignore your computer because the alarms will go off during this dive. The marine life on this dive is very friendly. The last time I did The Washing Machine, at one point I had a Turtle hanging out with me on my left side and a small nurse shark on my right side. (There are lots of YouTube videos of the Washing Machine.)

The Austin Smith Wreck: The wreck itself is nice, but nothing special, but it has some resident reef sharks including "Finnegan", who is immediately recognizable because he is missing his dorsal fin. The wreck is also inhabited by groupers who will come over to someone taking pictures and "pose" for the photographer. (OK, that may be a bit of an exaggeration, but they will sit still and let you get very close to them and take their picture.) I have also heard that recently there is a Goliath Grouper that has started hanging out at the Austin Smith.

Dog Rocks / The Cathedral: Simply a breathtaking swim through that opens up into a Cathedral-like room.

Pig Island & the Thunderball Grotto: These are not dives, but they are worth noting and they are a trade off. Going here means that we don't get our early morning dive(s) on one day but they are very cool. Pig Island is a small island that has some friendly feral pigs. When they hear the sound of an approaching boat, they will often swim out to meet the boat in the hopes that we have some food for them. It is a pretty cool experience. Thunderball Grotto is just around the corner from Pig Island and it has been used in a number of movies including "Thunderball" and "Into the Blue".

Will they do a "Shark Dive"?

Probably. A lot of people have mixed feelings about shark feeding dives, and I have to admit that I do too. Anyone who knows me knows that I am fascinated by sharks. I have serious reservations, however about associating divers with food for an area's Apex Predator. I really like the way that the Aquacat does it. They get all the divers on the bottom and then bring a frozen "chumsicle" down on a rope. The divers are not close to the chumsicle and there is little likelihood of the sharks associating us with food.

While we are on the topic of the diving, what will I need for exposure protection?

The easy answer is that only you can answer that. A better answer would be to say that the water temps will likely be in the 77°-82° F range (give or take a little) and you will have the opportunity to do up to 5 dives most days. Heat loss tends to be cumulative. Personally, I will be wearing a 3/2 mm wetsuit and bringing a vest and a beanie. I may not use the vest, but if I do need it, its nice to have the option. (I also tend to sit out the night dives.) Having said that, I know someone who wears a 5mm wetsuit & hooded vest on every dive on trips like this. You may be fine in shorts & a rash guard, or you may need a 5mm suit & vest. Only you can answer that for yourself, but as for me ... I hate being cold. (As a really quick side note, it is a good idea to bring a sweat shirt or similar for being outside in the evenings.)

Oh, and one last thought to leave you with ...

To paraphrase the great poet-philosopher Jimmy Buffett:

The difference between a tourist and a traveller becomes apparent when things don't go according to plan. A "tourist" will freak out to some degree, while a "traveller" will simply roll with it.

Try to be a traveller not a tourist. Something will inevitably go wrong, that's just a fact of life. Relax, and roll with it. It will likely be OK and if nothing else, you might end up with a great story.