

# The HangLine

Issue #08-01

Posted January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008



## The Dive Charter A Case Study in Nautics

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Running a dive charter boat is a challenging and unique responsibility. Not only does the operator need to be familiar with all aspects of nautical competency, but diving and the underwater environment as well. In fact a good dive charter boat staff can make or break a dive. There are many different types of charter operations ranging from small short-haul single dive trips for two or more divers, to large live-aboard operations capable of carrying a dozen or so divers on 14 day excursions to remote destinations. The vessels themselves vary from small, rigid hull inflatable boats to large luxurious yachts, even cruise ships. Some companies manufacture dive boats exclusively, customizing the layout according to the operator's specific needs.

The charter boat industry has played a large role in the development of diving destinations by constantly exploring potential new dive sites. The efforts have helped establish some key policies on how we dive fragile ecosystems. They have also created a marketable product for shops and other people in the tourism industry. Most importantly they have continued to extend

the range of diving environments, offering fresh and challenging sites for technical divers.

Choosing which charter boat company is best for you will depend on your interests, diving style and of course – budget. Look for many of the same virtues that you would in a dive shop, including the qualifications they hold. You may be choosing an operation based on a specific diving destination or you may be looking to choose one that can provide you with a variety of diving activities (i.e. wreck, reef, drift). In either case, you should select an operation only after carefully looking at the vessel and its operators.





## The Vessel



**Design** – As mentioned dive boats come in all shapes and sizes. The smaller the boat, the less room you will have to dress and move around. A small boat is also predisposed to rough weather and turbulent sea states. Small boats however can offer a more personal level of service. Some boats are large and designed to carry anywhere from twelve to thirty divers to a dive site. These are occasionally referred to as ‘cattle boats’ because they basically herd divers onto single site, obviously not an appealing feature. I have also dived off of very large boats that were so well laid out and organized that diving with twenty other divers was not in any way an unpleasant experience. One operation out of Santa Barbara in California took two dozen divers out on three to seven day trips. When I first thought about diving with this company, I was concerned about being lost in the crowd. The boat was designed and built wide and spacious with extremely functional amenities such as equipment rinsing stations, large diving platforms and gearing areas with lots of elbow room. When we arrived at a dive site they

‘opened the gates’ after explaining to the divers everything they needed to know to dive the area including where to go and how long they had. The gates would remain open for at least two to three hours, and as a result, the divers did not all storm into the water at the same time. It was remarkable. On a four day trip, I was able to log close to twenty dives and never run into more than one or two other pairs of divers. Good use of the deck space combined with a well thought out deck plan allowed this vessel to effectively dive a large number of divers.

Some boats are not custom designed for diving but have been converted from some other application. Regardless of the boat’s original function, all designs need to have a good area to suit up, a place to enter the water





easily (especially for divers equipped with technical diving gear), a good ladder to climb out on, as well as a place to keep warm or get dressed before dives.

**Seaworthiness** – The ‘Jolly Roger’ may fly on her mast and offer an adventurous atmosphere, but if she leaks, the fun won’t last for long. All commercial vessels are required to meet federally regulated standards. These standards ensure that dive charter vessels carry the proper equipment and are sound in various seas, in addition to complying with operational regulations (i.e. licensed, competent crew)

**Equipment** – A well equipped boat begins with safety gear: life jackets, EPIRBs, flares, extinguishers, lines, life rings, emergency plans and muster lists. They will have all the necessary electronic navigational equipment and charts. They should also have everything necessary to save a dive such as SCUBA repair tools, spare parts and spare gear. All dive boats are required to carry oxygen, first aid

systems and for charters carrying technical divers, enough oxygen gas for emergency decompression and worst case scenarios. The more advanced the level of diving done off of a boat, the more involved the decompression platform (bar) should be.

**Amenities** – Some amenities are standard with requisite features, while others are decadent add-ons, like multi-media entertainment devices, warm towels, cut fruit and staff who put your gear together for you and even suit you up in your gear. Basic amenities should include water to avoid dehydration, a head (toilet) and a camera rinse bucket.

**Versatility** – The larger the vessel the more room you are likely to have; however, the ability for the ship to maneuver is greatly reduced. Depending on how a boat is powered, large boats are restricted in their capacity to operate ‘live’ around divers (i.e. picking up divers in current) and access shallow reefs and sites where the



Whether it is a working vessel or a passenger vessel, professionalism is expected at all times.

It is more than just an appearance, it is about qualified competency that keeps customers happy and safe... and coming back.





boats draft is too deep to travel. For technical divers, this can present a significant problem if they have any problems on remote sites with current and adverse sea conditions. Slow or underpowered boats can take forever getting to sites. Many of the larger charter boats will have smaller 'skiffs' that can be deployed to pick up divers who surface away from the mother ship or for drift/current dives.

## Staff

**Qualifications** – The number of crew a boat will have will depend on the size of boat, its layout and the number of divers it carries. A good crew will be well trained and competent in not only the operation of the vessel, but its maintenance. Dive boats like all other pieces of machinery break down. Many divers are probably under the impression that once they jump off the boat into the water and disappear, the staff lie out on the deck and tan. Over the years I have found that I have spent for more time repairing a ship's engine and swabbing decks than I have soaking up any sun. This is a safety issue as well; when the engine breaks down and a diver is floating away on the surface, crew need to be able to fix the problem quickly and pick up their passengers.



**Personality** – One might even say this refers to attitude. When I board a ship as a

paying customer, I want to be greeted with a smile and a handshake, not find the crew running around trying to prepare the vessel. It gives this impression that the operation is not well organized or lacks any respect for me and my needs. There are exceptions to this, but for the most part, it is reasonable to expect that all of the pre-voyage tasks be completed PRIOR to the voyage. Anything less might suggest that the ship and her crew are not set to head out to sea and that will result in losing the client's confidence. When I skippered dive charters, I always went to great lengths to have me and my crew ready to acknowledge passengers. Divers waiting to board a boat are already anxious; they do not need to have any their preconceived concerns further exacerbated by being neglected at the dock.

Crew should continue to present a positive, confident and approachable disposition through out the trip. A bad or uneventful dive can always be boosted with an upbeat and imaginative tall tale. The icing on the cake is the Divemaster who is eager to make your trip more enjoyable by always trying to find ways to better serve you.

**Appearance** – Uniforms and personal hygiene are important factors in making a good first impression. A well run operation will ensure that the crew are recognizable, uniforms help provide an identity. If a crew member does not take the time to groom his appearance, he sends a message that he does not respect the people he is working for or the people he is taking care of. If you are trying to select an operator to go diving with, keep some of the following questions in mind:





- ✓ Is the vessel clean, shipshape and sea-worthy?
- ✓ How many crew will be aboard?
- ✓ Does the operation supply tanks and weights or are you required to bring them?
- ✓ Is the vessel Coast Guard certified?
- ✓ Is the vessel designed and built specifically for dive charters?
- ✓ Do they carry First Aid Oxygen and are they trained to use it?
- ✓ Will there be an orientation, safety briefing and dive briefing?
- ✓ Does the safety briefing include subjects such as diver recall, emergency procedures and diving regulations?
- ✓ Are emergency protocols or 'Muster' sheets posted on the vessel?
- ✓ If it is a larger boat, does it have a life raft or a skiff to pick up divers?
- ✓ Is there lots of room to move about and store your equipment?

~ *Safe Diving*

