



AMERICAS WHALES AND WALLS

One of the world's few female luxury-liveaboard captains shares her passion for her work and her world

Text & Images By **Amanda Smith**

Scuba diving was a passion I discovered later in my life, and I am envious now when I see the young divers that come aboard my home, the *M/V Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*, that I was not able to start diving much earlier. At the same time, I am excited for the adventures that await them.

The *Aggressor* in Turks and Caicos has not always been my home. Until 12 years ago insurance claims handling dominated my life

until I discovered scuba while on holiday in Turkey. In a very short period of time I had quit my job, downsized my property and was heading out to Turks and Caicos. Almost nobody I knew had heard of the islands and, I confess, neither had I. In reality, most of my friends thought that I had moved to Turkey!

As a rookie dive instructor, with just 300 dives under my belt, most of which were in England, I was about to take on the world of dive instruction, sharing my newfound passion with anyone who would let me, travelling the length and breadth of the world's oceans. I made it to Turks and Caicos and stopped! The rest, as they say, is history. I immediately fell in love with the diving around Turks and Caicos and the culture of the islands themselves. That was 12 years ago.

At the time, I was the proud owner of a small digital point-and-shoot camera and was delighted to have a housing for it. Not once did I shoot that camera underwater in Turks and Caicos. Instead, a housed Nikon D70 was thrust into my hands right from the outset and I very quickly learnt underwater photography from Captain Piers, who later went on to become my

 Humpback whales come to the Turks and Caicos from January to April to give birth and mate



mentor, teaching me everything I needed to know to take on the role of captain.

Two years later and a 200-ton Yachtmaster qualification under my belt saw me as second Captain and then Master of the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*.

For me the diving around Turks and Caicos offers a great diversity. Beautiful, richly populated walls provide a delightful backdrop for all the flora and fauna that reside there. Turn your back to the wall and all you see is deep blue ocean, turn back and see blue chromis and cascades of creole wrasse.

It is not the rare and peculiar that drives my passion for the diving in the Turks and Caicos Islands, it is the behaviour of the prevalent fish as they interact and occupy the reef together that fascinates me – the groupers with the moray eels, the bar jacks with the stingrays or the trumpetfish with whatever feeding partner they can find. It is a treat to learn their characters and enjoy their interactions. Every season brings a fresh batch of critters; jawfish with eggs, pipehorses and eagle rays, from macro to the massive, there is never a dull moment.

Then there are the humpback whales that visit the area in the winter months. From January to April, I am privileged to snorkel with these elegant and graceful creatures as they visit the warmer waters of the Atlantic to mate and bring their calves into the world. There may be several guests in the water with a humpback, but if they pass and make eye contact with me, I could swear that this mammal and I are alone in the water. My favourite encounter is to swim with a singing male humpback. The song vibrates through your core as the notes that they hit vary from a deep rumbling timbre to a high-pitched whoop and every chord in between. It is a life-altering experience that keeps me coming back for more.

That I get the opportunity to share all this with our guests just adds to the adventure. The *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* is both my home, and the delightful, luxurious platform from which I get to share the underwater world with all our guests. With 19 Aggressor yachts, worldwide, I know I can continue my globetrotting and dive explorations whilst still returning to my liveaboard home. Eat, sleep, dive, repeat; I live it, I love it! [SD](#)

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The reefs are inhabited by all manner of fascinating critters. Clockwise from left: a flamingo tongue snail, jawfish with eggs, and a slender filefish