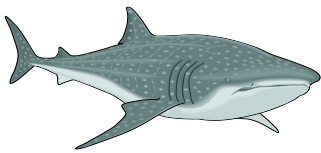


DIVE THE FLOWER GARDENS & STETSON BANKS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

Many of our diver friends know little about the Flower Gardens and Stetson Banks National Marine Sanctuary, or the live-aboard dive boat called the M/V Fling. Below you will find my brief attempt to describe the events of the trip.

The Flower Gardens are really our **Texas' Caribbean reef system**. They are located about 110 miles southeast of Freeport Texas and consist of two salt dome structures called the East and West Flower Gardens. The West Flower Garden is the deeper reef cap and for that reason is normally the first dive site.

The dive boat the M/V Fling is a converted crew boat now utilized as dive boats with bunks for twenty nine divers, three dive store divemasters and six crew members. The boat are equipped with two berthing compartments, one forward and one amidships (center of boat below the galley). In addition there are three restrooms or "HEADS" as they're called aboard ships. They have a galley (kitchen) where the cooking takes place and a Salon which seats about 24 persons. Three meals are served daily plus a continental breakfast before the first dive of the day. Quick energy snacks are always available and lemonade and coffee are provided free. If you want soda, i.e. coke, etc., they're for sale. Beer too is available, "after the diving is over". The galley crew keeps a tab of what you owe and collects before returning to the dock. The boat has three large diesel engines and have a cruising speed of approximately 16 knots. The Fling are equipped with their own high pressure air compressors, so you'll always have plenty of air and nitrox.



The travel time from Freeport is about seven hours to the West Flower Gardens, and nearly an hour to move from the West Gardens to the East Flower Gardens. Divers are asked to arrive at the boats about 8:00 PM to sign in and fill out release forms. As soon as the check in and administrative details are completed the boat will depart.

Upon arrival at the boats you'll need to load and stow your dive gear on the back deck, then make a bunk selection. There are four to six bunks to each room. **Sheets, a pillow, pillow case and blanket are provided. DON'T FORGET TO BRING YOUR OWN TOWEL.** With sleeping arrangements completed, and equipment tucked away, it's time for the briefing.

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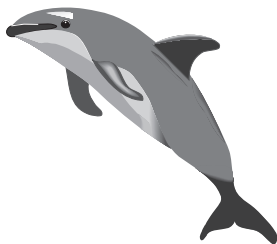
During a briefing you'll be introduced to the boats' captains (per regulations the boat always has two captains aboard), the volunteer boat divemasters and galley crew. The briefing is conducted by one of the captains and boat divemaster as the boats head to the jetties. Most people turn in before the boats reach the jetties, you'll need your rest, diving is hard work and much safer if you're well rested. Most people sleep well and begin waking up when the hum of the diesels slow indicating our pending arrival. A continental breakfast of sweet rolls, fruit, coffee or juice is already laid out by the volunteer galley crew, a full breakfast is served after the first dive. The normal routine is for the galley help to take the first dive while the divemasters prepare the divers with a briefing, this typically occurs at 7:00 am. The boats have two boat divemasters who are assisted by divemasters from the sponsoring dive shops.

The policies and procedures in effect aboard the Motor Vessels Fling are calculated to provide the greatest safety and best experiences possible - it's always safety, safety and more safety. Like most good dive boats, entry and exit times and depths are monitored by the divemasters. Entry is achieved via a giant stride off either side. Dives are limited to a maximum depth of 130 feet on the first dive and 100 feet on the rest of the dives. Always surface with air pressure in your tank after a required safety stop. The boats have three weighted safety stop lines suspended to about 40 feet with a second stage regulator (Octopus) available on the starboard stern line for an out-of-air situation. A 300 foot safety line with float extends from the boat's stern for the diver who miscalculates and misses the entry ladder. If you really "miss the boat" and the safety line, there is a Zodiac, a rubber boat with motor. The boat has one very important rule, a required 2-1/2 hour surface interval between dives.

So if you're diving with a computer and do all the dives possible, you can dive seven, possibly eight times on a two day trip, and twelve dives on a three day trip.

After the briefing you can enter the water and take your first glimpse of these unique reefs, large boulders and spectacular coral heads measuring 10 feet across. The West Gardens have grown to within 75 feet of the surface and covers nearly 100 acres. Many queen angelfish, groupers, amberjacks, great barracuda, red snapper inhabit this reef. There are 175 resident tropical species as well as numerous migratory species. If you're lucky you may see an Atlantic manta. These majestic palagics can have wing spans over 10 feet. On occasions divers have actually had the opportunity to pet a whale shark, "some fish story to tell your dive buddies".

Upon completion of your first dive it's time to partake of a delicious breakfast and a brief rest in the sun before making dive two. Generally all divers are finished with the second dive by 11:30 - 12:00 and the crew is raising the entry ladders for the move to the East Flower Gardens.

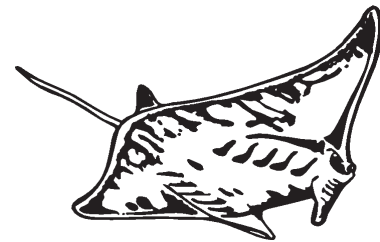


EAST FLOWER GARDENS: The actual distance between the banks is twelve miles. The East Flower Gardens is shallower, about 65 feet, and for this reason is dived later in the day. The East Flower Gardens has a larger reef cap, about 250 acres. The fish life is similar on both Gardens. The dive schedule typically calls for two afternoon dives and one night dive on the East Gardens. The night dive typically starts at 9:00 PM, and is a highly recommended experience. Naturally, glow sticks, a dive light and a backup light are required for the safety of everyone. At days end you're probably tired, five (5) dives makes for a long day. Normally, most divers turn in early, however, for the foolhardy someone usually has a DVD or video tape of the days activities or a movie to watch.

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STETSON BANK - DAY TWO: On October 11, 1996, President Clinton signed the bill which added Stetson Bank to the Flower Gardens Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

About 3:00 AM in the morning the boat slip's the mooring for the trip to Stetson Bank. Stetson Rock as it is sometimes called, represents the second distinct dive site of our trip and lies atop a salt dome approximately 70 miles from South of Galveston, Texas. The name comes from the outline of the outcropping hence the name Stetson. The sediments from the Gulf floor have been pushed up by the salt dome and created visible strata of claystones and siltstones. Stetson has an unusual amount of fish life including turtles, stingrays, manta rays, scorpionfish, barracuda, amberjacks and groupers. Average dive depth is 80 feet. We normally dive two dives on Stetson and depart about noon for the trip back to Freeport.



Approximately 1 hour before docking, the Captain totals your bill (for sodas, beers, souvenir T-shirts and Caps). There will be a tip bucket so you can show your appreciation of the hard work of the galley crew and boat divemasters. These crew members are generally volunteers and not paid crew.

We should arrive at the Freeport Jetties about 6:30 PM and be tied up by 7:00 PM. If this sounds like fun to you, just call or visit Sea Sports Scuba at one of our five convenient locations and reserve a space on our next live-aboard experience aboard the M/V FLING.

Three day trips offer a different schedule with the opportunity to enjoy a unique night dive on Stetson Bank in addition to a couple of extra day dives.

By Doug Peters

Visit <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov/>

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