Frying Pan Tower Adventure Experience Questions

by Amber M. Parker and Richard Neal

My trip to the Frying Pan Tower was booked but I had no idea what to expect. Prior to my trip, I sent a list of questions to the tower’s owner, Richard Neal. Here are the questions I emailed to Richard before our trip, his responses to my questions and my after trip commentary.

1. Where do we meet the boat to depart Southport and what time?

Richard’s Answer: We normally depart from the dock about 8am Friday mornings. Sometimes we use a vessel from Southport and sometimes from Wilmington. We will know and advise which vessel and location will be used several days in advance.

Amber’s Commentary: This was one of the most frustrating parts of planning the trip. Matt and I are sort of detail freaks and we really wanted to know where we needed to be and when we needed to be there. In the end, I learned that when traveling across the ocean either by boat or helicopter, there is no other way than to be flexible. The weather and seas can be predicted but not controlled so being flexible on this area of the trip is a must!

2. What time do we return to Southport?

Richard’s Answer: We try to leave the tower by noon Sunday to insure a safe return and time for people to get back to their homes or catch flights.

Amber’s Commentary: This was THE most frustrating part of the trip. Matt and I are sort of detail freaks and we really wanted to know where we needed to be and when we needed to be there. In the end, I learned that when traveling across the ocean either by boat or helicopter, there is no other way than to be flexible. The weather and seas can be predicted but not controlled so being flexible on this area of the trip is a must!

3. We are divers (at least I am as of now. Matt is getting his cert in June). How much gear are we permitted to bring?

Richard’s Answer: On your trip we will have room for your scuba gear, spear guns and at least 2 tanks. Please note currents & waves are not always in agreement and sometimes a trip is spent on the tower with no “wet” time.

Amber’s Commentary: We were super glad we didn’t bother with renting and lugging out the snorkel and dive gear. It wouldn’t have fit on the helicopter anyway and at all times the tower was surrounded by 20, 30, 40 or more sharks and hundreds of barracuda so no one was thrilled at the idea of jumping into all that anyway. Plus, the trip to and from the water is a long, difficult and dangerous process. I would recommend going to the tower without the plan to get into the water. There is plenty to do and see from the tower without getting into the water.

4. How do we get the gear and ourselves in/out of the water?

Richard’s Answer: Most of the time, the gear is left on the boat and it is used to retrieve divers and be a safety pick up for them, but we do have a divers lift that we operate from the hoist. Two divers can ride down to the water fully suited. The safe weight limit on it is 600 pounds. Otherwise, we have a Bosun’s chair that after leaving equipment on the boat, divers have used to return to the tower’s top.

Amber’s Commentary: It may be possible that the boat doesn’t stay out the entire weekend or if you travel by helicopter, there is no boat. If you want to go swimming, Richard said we could ask a random fisherman if they would help us if we are in the water but I would not be comfortable leaving my safety in the water to a random fisherman who could just take off and leave at any time. However, the water is very beautiful and underneath the tower is teeming with aquatic life it it might be worth the risk. Richard is in the process of obtaining a faster and more complex hoist system which may make this process more doable in the future.

5. Is fresh water available for washing gear?

Richard’s Answer: Yes. At any one time we have 11,000 gallons of rain water captured in our holding tanks that is available for washing off your gear.

Amber’s Commentary: Divers can be brought on and off of the tower fully suited up and gear can be rinsed off with plenty fresh rainwater.
6. Is fresh water use for showers limited?

Richard’s Answer: No, we do not limit how much water you use for showers, but the water heater does! It is a 100 gallon tank and is set very hot to allow everyone to take a shower.

Amber’s Commentary: No joke that water gets hot! I always had plenty of hot water for showers but then there were only five people staying on the tower during my trip. Besides, I usually preferred a cold shower. But be careful, when you turn on the hot water, it gets really, really hot. Also, the water is rain water stored in large storage tanks so it is not treated or tested for contaminants but it did wonders for my hair and skin. Don’t drink the water from the faucets and I used a bit of drinking water from the water cooler to brush my teeth. Sometimes, the water for the showers, sinks and toilets would be shut off to conserve power or to use it for other things, particularly at night or during cooking.

7. Are we allowed to bring alcohol?

Richard’s Answer: Yes, all trips to the tower are BYOB and we recommend staying with beer or wine as the tower and strong drink can be a bad combination. Moderation is important if you can take an 85’ step into the darkness.

Amber’s Commentary: We brought beer to the tower and the other couple brought beer and wine. Drinking alcohol in moderation is important but don’t forget to drink plenty of water too! Also, the refrigerator doesn’t get super cold so the drinks are not ice cold but they are cold enough and this just adds to the tower adventure experience!

8. Is the facility air conditioned?

Richard’s Answer: No, we use sunlight to charge a battery bank and have generators to provide all other electricity and as such do not provide (yet) air conditioning. Please keep in mind that at 85’ we experience near constant 10 kt winds which cools the facility pretty well.

Amber’s Commentary: There were a few times when the inside of the tower as a little warm but for the most part, the tower temperature was cool and there was always a nice breeze outside. Fans were available for guest rooms but I never even needed one.

9. What brand of toilet paper do you provide....totally kidding.

Richard’s Answer: Funny you should ask because we have a supply of about 40 rolls of official 1979 US Coast Guard toilet paper. Uh, but we have purchased “modern” replacements and the old paper pretty much is for show, like the 1960 emergency rationing water here too.

Amber’s Commentary: I never saw the old toilet paper but I did see the emergency water cans. Too cool!

10. Is fishing allowed from the pier? If yes, do you have bait?

Richard’s Answer: Yes and bait is all around us! We use the local small fish for bait and pull in progressively larger fish from them. We usually stop at just under shark size!

Amber’s Commentary: This place is a fisherman’s paradise. There were fish everywhere and it only took a few seconds to hook one.

11. Do you rent/fill scuba tanks?

Richard’s Answer: Surprisingly, while we can limit our liability for guests with a release waiver, the requirements for filling tanks exceeds our ability to safely insure each and every tank is properly charged and so we must decline to do so. Safety is our #1 concern followed by everything else. Sorry but we recommend bringing a couple spare tanks and refer people to Aquatic Safari for rental tank options.

Amber’s Commentary: Since we didn’t dive, this wasn’t an issue but one of the other guests checked with Aquatic Safari about diving and the person that they talked to was less than pleasant or helpful. Maybe you will have better luck.

12. Are the typical ocean conditions favorable for snorkeling?

Richard’s Answer: Usually anytime the wave conditions are 3’ or less and on periods of 8 seconds or greater
with a low current, then the conditions are great for snorkeling. The tower is built on a gentle crest (hill) in the area and therefore experiences differing wave and current conditions on a daily basis. Usually mid-morning to early afternoon are the best times to snorkel.

Amber’s Commentary: No one in our group was brave enough to jump into the school of sharks and barracuda despite the unbelievably beautiful water and awesome visibility. We were content with watching the aquatic life from the tower and every now and then, Richard would lower a GoPro camera into the water and we could watch the sharks and fish up close and personal from the comfort of the tower. Richard has a technology station that I labeled as his “Mad Scientist Station” due to all of the gadgets and cords.

13. Matt is a musician (an awesome guitar player). Can he bring his guitar or would that not be a good idea due to other guests?

Richard’s Answer: It all depends on the other guests. We also have a small guitar amplifier out here so if he plays an electric or miked acoustic everyone will benefit from his efforts. Please remember it is often moist and he would need a good waterproof case to keep it dry on both the trip out and from the humidity.

Amber’s Commentary: The guitar was an ordeal to bring to the tower but it was worth it to listen to Matt play before and after dinner. I even made up a song of my own about the Frying Pan Tower sung to the tune of, “Hotel California.”

14. Do we need to bring some of our own food or is it optional? Should we bring our own drinks?

Richard’s Answer: You both are on the ALL INCLUDED trip which means we provide all food needed (we all pitch in to cook since we’re a bunch of old guys and our cooking is, well...) So yes, if you wish you can bring additional food. Our kitchen is an open area where anyone can make something that suits them and we will also be making some food at generally meal times. Often meals are ignored for a bit if diving or snorkeling is going on! We will bring plenty of basic Gatorade and have lots of cool Culligan water, both hot (for tea & coffee) and cold.

Amber’s Commentary: If you care about what you eat, bring some food! The food that is on the tower looked like it had been there for a while and anything in the refrigerator when you get there has been unrefrigerated numerous times and for who knows how long. Richard did bring out a fresh supply of hot dogs, hamburgers, buns, bread, lettuce, Egg Beaters, Bacon and Oreos. That wasn’t really enough for five people for three days and two nights. Thankfully Matt caught some wonderful fish and the other couple brought along a variety of Polish sausages, bread and mushrooms and Matt and I brought granola bars, pretzels and caramel corn. I would recommend bringing some snacks and some nonperishable food items…especially condiments if you must have them.

15. Are there shaded areas outside?

Richard’s Answer: The main level has a 360 degree walkway and usually has some shade. The helipad can get pretty warm in the middle of the day but has some shade by the solar panels.

Amber’s Commentary: The helipad was so awesome but it didn’t have a lot of shade…which is bad news for a porcelain-skinned girl like me (don’t let my spray tan fool you) because I would have loved to spend a lot more time up there. Thankfully, the nylon hammocks were large enough to be pulled over to provide shade and there was plenty of shade on the tower.

16. Do you have fans? Will we need one?

Richard’s Answer: Yes we do have fans and depending on the breeze you may need one in your room.

Amber’s Commentary: I never felt like I was dying from heat even without AC on a metal tower out in the ocean. The breeze and the fans were awesome.

17. Do you have chairs outside or do we need to bring our own?

Richard’s Answer: We do have both reclining and regular chairs for both the main recreation room and for the helipad. Think of laying back at dusk and watching the sun set or at night and looking at the Milky Way. (No bugs, no mosquitos!)

Amber’s Commentary: There were plenty of chairs but none of us really stayed parked in one place for too long. Richard was right…there were NO bugs or spiders! I think that was a huge highlight of the trip for me. We
could sit out under the stars in hammocks for as long as
we wanted. The view of the stars was unlike any I have
ever seen before!

18. Do you provide rods and tackle or do we need to
bring our own?

Richard’s Answer: We do have some rods but they are
donated items and you might want to bring one of your
own. We usually have plenty of gear and bait is just
below us!

Amber’s Commentary: The rods at the tower worked
great but Matt snapped his line a lot due to catching
huge fish, sharks and getting snagged on the tower or the
bottom. If you like to fish, you will not be disappointed.
Just bring plenty of weights, leaders, hooks, etc. so you
don’t run out.

19. Do you have binoculars?

Richard’s Answer: Yes. We have a couple pairs both for
basic viewing and some high powered ones for a close
look at neighboring ships or the moon. We also have a
telescope on the tower for amazing views of the moon’s
craters!

Amber’s Commentary: We never pulled these out.

20. Do you have a DVD player for movies?

Richard’s Answer: Yes we do and we usually bring a
laptop or two as well if you wish to use the Internet or
you can just connect to our unsecured wireless.

Amber’s Commentary: We never turned on a TV or a
movie. We were busy soaking up the views, working or
relaxing.

21. Do you have towels or do we need to bring?

Richard’s Answer: We love it when guests bring and
donate their old towels but yes! We do have towels and
linens for each person. We also have a large supply of
unused hotel soaps and shampoo from many business
trips!

Amber’s Commentary: There were plenty of towels,
shampoos and soaps at the tower but I did bring my own
towel and I appreciated having it.

22. Do we need a fishing license to fish off of the tower?

Richard’s Answer: Technically yes unless you are a
student, disabled, a veteran or are being trained
although it is difficult to imagine how this regulation
might be enforced since we eat what we catch!

Amber’s Commentary: Stick to the law, get a fishing
license.